

GOOD TALK
A STUDY OF THE ART OF CONVERSATION

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THE ART OF CONVERSATION

by

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To
TOM AND ANGELA

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CHAPTER I

THE ENDLESS INTERCHANGE

PEOPLE are talking. At this very moment of the shifting present, millions on millions of words are being breathed into the air. From the kraals of Equatoria to the snow-huts of Greenland, from the edge of the eternal snows to the bowels of the earth, they are talking—talking shop, talking politics, talking scandal, talking religion, talking smut, talking of themselves and each other, talking of everything and nothing. And this has gone on, without break or pause, for certainly thousands and, not improbably, hundreds of thousands of years.

Of only a few casual fragments of this ceaseless interchange have we any record whatever, and even that is seldom fit to be trusted. The written word remains, as long at least as the material on which it is written; but talk is a vibration of the ether, a ripple lighter than air, dying away, beyond a narrow circle of earshot, into an eternal silence, and even within that circle, making but feeble and transient impression

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upon memories themselves destined to perish out of the universe.

It is only when we cease to talk and start to orate that we stand more than the most infinitesimal chance of our words being perpetuated. But even so, how poor and unsatisfying are the most exhaustive records of public speaking! You will never discover more than the dry bones of oratory on the printed page. What a redoubtable old bore is Mr Gladstone—to read! And what comparison can there be between the involved jumble of his verbiage and the majestic wisdom of Edmund Burke's periods—reduced to prose? And yet we have still living evidence of how the Grand Old Man, with his flashing eye and sonorous delivery, could hold every audience spellbound; whereas Burke's nickname among his fellow members, in an age of rhetorical connoisseurship, was the Dinner Bell.

Our forefathers, if we may trust their own account of the matter, were great readers of sermons. But sermons in those days, if we may judge from the forbidding and dust-covered volumes that sometimes form part of rectory furniture, were only too often small books or monstrously inflated essays. These were read from the pulpit over the heads of audiences, content to climb to salvation on stepping stones of

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ennui. We judge them as literature; and sometimes, as for instance when Bossuet or Newman is the author, acknowledge them to be masterpieces in that kind. But we can never recapture the magic that scored grimy runnels on the cheeks of the colliers, who, twenty-thousand strong, listened to the exhortations of George Whitefield—poor enough stuff, in all conscience, to read!

For there is more even in oratory, the most formal of all ways of speaking, than the mere record of the words. You might as well try to recapture the flight of the eagle, by exhibiting one, stuffed, in a glass case, as hope to resurrect speeches by reading them. How much less can we hope to preserve the talk of man to man in its living reality! We cannot have shorthand reporters present to take down every word hot from the tongue; we cannot fit up a dictating machine wherever two or three are gathered together. And if we could, what would it profit us? The life of a conversation is more than the words.

And how far, in the absence of such a machine, is it safe to trust to the written as a record of the spoken word? Again and again we come across accounts of conversations purporting to be verbally accurate: they fatten volumes of memoirs; they are delivered on oath from witness boxes; they are accepted for

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gospel, without hesitation or criticism, like the accounts of their patients' dreams from which the nerve-doctors of gay Vienna leap to such spicy conclusions. It is all as neat as a game of consequences—he said to her, and she said to him, and then the world said.

But now try to remember exactly what was said at your own luncheon table, an hour ago; get pencil and notebook, and put down as much as you can remember of what passed between you and your friend on the walk from which you have just returned; try, even, to remember the exact words in which the object of your adoration intimated her willingness to be a wife, or a sister, to you. The best you can do is to reconstruct what you think might, or ought to have been, said, and fix that reconstructed version so firmly in your mind that at last you come to remember it as the original.

When it is a question of reconstructing, you may be sure that the narrator's interests, or preferences, will contribute to the result. How often are he or his hero allowed to have played an undignified or humiliating part? A Boswell or a Pepys may almost contrive to annihilate *amour-propre* in the interests of truth, but where, in all literature, shall we find their fellows?

And can we be quite sure that the deadliness and felicity of Dr Johnson's replies, as recorded in Boswell's immortal *Life*, would have been quite so unfailing without a certain retouching by the biographer? For so consummate an artist was Boswell, that he would a thousand times rather have endured the spectacle of his own annihilation by a nicely placed thunderbolt, than have owed his salvation to its fizzing out in the soil like a dud shell.

The narrator may give himself away sometimes without realizing it, even to the extent of doing himself injustice. The self portrait that he may contrive to throw upon the screen may produce upon his audience an exactly opposite effect from what was intended. People without much sense of humour are never more delighted than in telling the world how neatly they have scored off somebody or other. Solemn Wordsworth loved to tell how a stranger had once come up to him with the enquiry: 'Have you seen my wife?' and how he, Wordsworth, had replied: 'I did not even know that you had a wife.' Even so, we cannot help suspecting that this portentous repartee only assumed its final form after much profound meditation in the solitude of the Cumbrian hills, and that what the poet really said was something more nearly approaching:

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‘Er—— your wife? No, I don’t think so. At least . . .’

But naturally solemn men who wish to pass themselves off as successful wits, are few in comparison with the often mild and gentle individuals who like to be thought capable, on occasion, of being terrible and ruthless supermen. It is extraordinary to see even Charles Dickens, the champion of human kindness and brotherly love, pillorying himself as wholly a busybody and more than half a brute, solely in order to impress his public with the spectacle of Charles Dickens, the avenging angel of Victorian virtue, the top-hatted Punch whose cudgel lays out everybody, from beaks to blackguards.

The story comes in that series of journalese sketches entitled *The Uncommercial Traveller*, who is, of course, Dickens himself. The novelist is chaffed, in unparliamentary terms, by a girl of seventeen or eighteen in a London street. What follows is less a narrative than a wish dream. The honour of Dickens is signally vindicated. He first pursues his assailant and her audience of young roughs for a mile, on the other side of the street, until he comes to a policeman. All the roughs instantly flee, leaving the girl—whose flight with them would obviously have spoilt the story—alone. Then Dickens gets to work on the

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policeman, with the majestic query: 'Do you know my name?' Robert does indeed know, and, presumably, trembles. The conversation continues, in supermanly strain:

'Take that girl into custody, on my charge, for using bad language in the streets.'

Robert hesitates—he has not heard of such a charge. Dickens, with the whole of the Police Act at his finger tips, has:

'Would he take my word he would not get into trouble? Yes, sir, he would do that.'

Exit accordingly a properly humble Robert with a duly humiliated child of seventeen or eighteen, Stationwards.

Next morning it is the turn of the magistrates, who fail to treat Dickens with appropriate deference, and actually ask him:

'Do you really wish this girl to be sent to prison?'

'To which', says Dickens, 'I grimly answered, staring: "If I didn't, why should I take the trouble to come here?"'

Collapse of magistrates; sentence of fine or imprisonment; final triumph of grim and staring Dickens.

All of which might be taken at its face value as a heavy count in the indictment of the man Dickens.

But it is at least probable that in Super-Dickens we have one of the many products of an irrepressibly fertile imagination. We know how morbidly thin-skinned was the real Dickens, and to what extraordinary lengths of indiscretion this weakness was capable of impelling him. Is it not in keeping that, having been driven, by his incapacity for standing chaff, into playing a part on the public stage which his conscience must have told him had been neither dignified nor sympathetic, he should have sought to rehabilitate himself in his own and his readers' eyes by recasting it, for the published version, in a form less galling to his pride?

So that we cannot trust the record of the spoken word even when it appears to tell against the narrator. The world is full of sheep in wolves' clothing. Our words die upon the air, and are resurrected, if at all, by the imagination in its own likeness; we can only guess, or try to divine, what part of those sentences enclosed between quotation marks represents what was actually spoken; but we can never know.

Even when we come to the notable sayings of history, sentences that have impressed themselves indelibly on the universal memory, we are lost in a hopeless conflict of evidence. Nothing is more famous than Wellington's 'Up Guards, and at 'em!'

And yet Wellington's own comment is reported to have been: 'I never said anything so ridiculous!' We can well believe him. On the other side, at this same battle of Waterloo, we have General Cambronne's heroic: 'The Guard dies; it does not surrender!' But apart from the trifling fact that Cambronne himself did not die and did eventually surrender, there is better reason to believe his answer to the summons to have been couched in one word, and that so filthy as to be unrepeatable.

What were the last words of the younger Pitt? Did he expire breathing: 'My country! How I leave my country!' or did he merely remark: 'I should like one of Bellamy's pies'? There is authority for both versions, though the origin of the latter has been attributed, by some, to Mr Bellamy himself. But the dying statesman may well have uttered either of these sentences, or both in succession, or something totally different, or nothing at all. You take your choice, ladies and gentlemen, in the blessed certainty that, until the books are unsealed at the last day, no one will ever prove it wrong!

And again, when something notable is accepted as having been well and truly spoken, it is more than likely to be credited to the accounts of several different speakers. That aphorism about there being

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a religion of all sensible men, of which, however, sensible men never tell, has at least four confidently reputed original authors. Very probably it was not born of the tongue at all, but of the pen.

Even when we have more or less credible record of something having been said, we are liable to distort or even reverse its meaning. Poor George IV, in addition to his other sins, has been saddled with that of insane lying and boasting, on the ground of his having claimed to have commanded the Guards at Waterloo, and, on appealing to the Duke for confirmation, having been politely snubbed with: 'I have often heard Your Majesty say so.' Now if George, who was neither a fool nor a buffoon, ever said anything of the sort, the common-sense interpretation would surely be that he was, in a friendly manner, pulling the Duke's leg, or, as he would himself have put it, quizzing him, and that he was probably as delighted as everyone else present at the way the old strategist refused to be drawn. He can have little dreamed how the remark would hoodwink generations unborn.

I do not know whether anyone has tried to compile an anthology of conversation. No doubt the thing could be done, if it were agreed to pass for inclusion any alleged saying that has been written

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down and accepted by its readers; but it is safe to say that by far the greater part of such a collection would consist of more or less plausible fiction. It is almost as difficult to corner a will-o'-the-wisp, as to recapture the spoken word, once it has left the tongue.

For longer than we can compute, people have indeed been talking, but, beyond a few stray sentences, we shall never be able to do more than guess what exactly has passed between them. We can form a notion, more or less accurate, from such written evidence as has come down to us, of the sort of thing that was said; we can judge, from avowed fiction, the kind of thing that might have been said; we can make our own sound-picture and trust to its being as like as possible to the real thing. And that is all.

CHAPTER II

THE MYTH OF ORIGINS

HOW did it start? Who set this ball of conversation rolling down the ages—and when, and why, and where? About this, we are blankly ignorant, and evermore shall be so. Not all the efforts of all the scientists in the world can ever conceivably avail to lighten the darkness that enshrouds the origins of human speech. It is said to be possible to locate, more or less, the part of the brain that is principally concerned with speaking, and it is always safe to speculate about the time at which it first began to be noticeable, within limits of a few hundred-thousand years; but though it may, on occasion, be scientific to speculate, (speculation without proof can never beget certainty,) And proof we can never get.

But we can make up the story, according to the light that is in us—or rather the myth, for the best stories about the hidden origins of things have always been of this kind. We are like children, sitting on the banks of a river whose source they

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have never seen, and naturally locate in Fairyland.

We must begin this particular story at a time when nobody talked at all. But was there ever, strictly speaking, such a time? Have not even animals their own ways of communicating with each other? Is there not debate in the rooks' parliament? Does not my dog understand only too well the remarks of his neighbour behind the palings, things that an Airedale and a gentleman can by no means pass over in silence? Has not the nightingale, at mating season, anything to communicate? And are the possibilities of animal communication confined to the making of noises? Observation of birds, all seeming to wheel simultaneously, of co-operation in hive and herd, suggests some telepathic faculty of impulse transmission. We shall not press the evidence for talking horses and dogs, because the scientific inquisition has made it as much as any man's reputation for sanity is worth, to approach it with an open mind; but experience of any competent parrot is enough to show that the idea of speech is not beyond some dim comprehension, even of a bird. Poll knows as well as you do what 'Come on, scratch,' and rather better what 'Thank-you,' means—for in her vocabulary it stands for 'please' or 'stump up'.

It is a fascinating subject, but one on which we must

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forbear to dwell. Except for those eloquent horses and dogs in which we are not allowed to believe, the communication of animals is not what we understand by talking; it is more a sort of feeling together, than an exchange of anything so definite as ideas. Only in fables do animals converse. The hive may contain a queen, but not, even among the drones, an autocrat of the breakfast table; the rook parliament never gets on a level of higher intellectuality than those party conventions that are reported to yell continuously for anything up to an hour in favour of some candidate for Presidential honours. We must agree to leave beasts out of the great conversation that is taking place all over the habitable surface of our planet.

So, for practical purposes, we may take it for granted that if we go far enough back, we shall come to an ancestor who was still so much of a beast as never to have learned to talk. This enormously great grandfather we can visualize as something like an ape, a peaceful vegetarian, dwelling mostly in trees, with huge, hairy fore-limbs to climb, and fingers to grip. He might have gone on to this day, an ape among apes, never breaking the silence except by whatever sort of inarticulate noise apes are accustomed to make, had he not achieved, or blundered upon,

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the most fruitful of all discoveries: he found that he could stand up and balance himself, that he could get about down below on two legs instead of four.

Not because he wanted, but because he had to; that, at least, is how we can best reconstruct the story. Something drove him out of his beloved trees: it may have been a change of climate; it may have been that the stern and unbending old apes, who refused to move with the times, constituted themselves the Michaels of the leafy Paradise, and drove forth Adam and Eve to seek their fortunes in the open country: or perhaps it may have been that our first human parents were bitten with a craving not for apples but for meat, and were consequently impelled to come down from their trees and chase their dinners on terra firma.

You can select whichever version you like best. But in all of them the story leads up to a point at which the ex-tree dweller rears himself up on his hind legs, and makes these two perform what with other animals had been the work of four. And then the decisive question arises—what is to become of the forelegs, with which ape-man has swung himself from branch to branch? They might have withered away from lack of use, like the penguin's wings; or by a supreme effort of genius, Adam and Eve may

find some wholly new use for them. Find it they do, and everything human, including talk, is the result of that achievement.

The fore limbs, no longer wanted for getting about, either on ground or above it, become arms, and the fingers, hands. This revolutionary acquisition of a pair of spare limbs is exploited through hundreds and thousands of gradually humanizing generations. Man, banished from his trees, follows his hands up an invisible ladder; he picks things up; handles, examines, and finally uses them. Soon he begins to find the old, ape brain inadequate. The primeval Adam is as unfit to be entrusted with hands as the modern Adam with machinery. But unlike the modern Adam, he proves not incapable of adapting himself to the situation. To manage his new pair of hands, he develops a human brain; and very shortly afterwards, as we reckon time, in these unrecorded æons, he makes a third discovery, that of the human voice as a means for communicating the ideas that are beginning to boil and simmer therein. He breaks a hitherto eternal silence. The word is spoken that starts the great conversation on its way.

Or perhaps it was not a word at all that started it, but a gesture. If we are to enter into the spirit of our remote fathers, we must divest ourselves, very

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thoroughly, of our own ideas of the obvious. It may not have been at all obvious to these two-legged hand users, who felt a desire to talk, that the way to do this was by making different kinds of noises. It may have seemed as revolutionary a heresy as the idea of walking had been to the conservative apes. The obviousness was all the other way: hands were the wonderful talisman that was beginning to make man feel himself in a class apart from his fellow beasts. If you wanted to sharpen a stone and jab it into a wolf's eye, or to heave a rock over a precipice when your next-cave neighbour was standing just underneath it, it was a case for hands; if you wanted to do anything new and startling, you used your hands; and when you wanted to notify anything of urgency to members of your family, it would be natural to grab hold of them, to point, to gesticulate, to make signs, and perhaps even to shove or belabour them into the way that they should go. No doubt Adam opened his mouth and made a good deal of excited noise in the process; but that noise, we may well believe, was for the relief of his private feelings rather than—as they say in military chits—for information and necessary action.

So it may well have been for a time longer than the whole of recorded history, before it was decided

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whether the hand or the tongue was to constitute itself the unruly member. The hand probably had the start; but the advantages of the voice as a long range transmitter, must have been apparent from a quite early stage. Even that old Adam of all, the primordial tree climber, must have been accustomed to shouting 'Hi!' or something equivalent, to Eve through the depths of the forest, like most other animals. But shouting 'Hi' is not talking; for that you have got to shout something definite. Eve may be in the process of surveying some prospective residence with apparently vacant possession, when it may occur to Adam, after reverting to his ancestral tree-climbing habit, to notify her that the existing owner, a cave bear, is on his way home. It will be just as well if he is able to indicate 'bear', as otherwise she might jump to the fatal conclusion that he is merely tired of waiting.

On that showing, the first word ever spoken would have been a kind of roar conveying the idea of bear in particular, or danger in general—a noun, in fact. But we may perhaps go back further still, and claim the honour for the demonstrative pronoun. Adam grips hold of Eve, points to something or other, perhaps a snake in the grass, perhaps even to a particularly desirable apple, and vociferates the equivalent

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of 'That!' or 'That there!' But it would defy the ingenuity of a casuist to say where the cry ends and speech begins. Even if we could borrow one of Mr Wells's time machines, and study the question on the spot, we might go on for centuries doubting whether or not we could certify our ancestors as well and truly articulate, or to what particular noise we could assign the credit of being the first word; but if, after having reversed our machine as far back as dumb ape-man, and then gone into forward gear again, speeding over some one or two hundreds of millenniums, we might slow down and step off into a world whose leading inhabitants were crudely, but unmistakably, talking as well as gesticulating.

But even so, we might not find them using crude and simple phrases like 'bear' and 'look out!' Simplicity is more often the crown of artifice than the flower of innocence. If we may judge by the analogy of savage folk to-day, we should expect primitive man's first efforts at speech to involve him in a hopeless and complicated muddle. Very likely the sound that signified that Big-black-bull-buffalo-in-the-marsh-by-the-stream was lowering his horns in a business-like manner, was hardly distinguishable from another, intimating that the hand, heart, cave and club of

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Romeo would either be acceptable to Juliet, or he would know the reason why.

But we can do no more than hint at possibilities. These ancestors of ours are people in a story, and though we make it as plausible as we can, we shall never know for certain how much—if any—of it is true.

All that we do know, and all that really matters, is that at some quite indeterminable time before the dawn of history, members of our species developed the faculty of making noises to signify their real or alleged thoughts. As man emerges into the light it is as a full-blown talker. The great conversation is already of immemorial antiquity.

CHAPTER III

A POSSIBLE GOLDEN AGE

IN one sense, we might even say that the great days of conversation were over before we have the least record of it, the time, that is to say, when talk ranked as the highest of all human modes of expression. For perhaps a millennium of centuries, the only means of communicating to any one mind what was going on inside another was by word of mouth, reinforced by gesture. The words of the Psalm would then have been all-comprehensive:

‘We have heard with our ears, and our fathers have told us.’

You had to remember what you were told, and in due course pass it on, if the harvest of human experience was not to perish ungarnered. It was probably only very gradually that it occurred to men and women to find even verbal means of fixing anything in the mind, once the sound of it had died away. You talked or shouted for some immediate practical purpose; you said something equivalent to ‘Look out—

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snake!' or 'Damn you, get out!' It was only when your brain had developed considerably that you began to say: 'The right way to deal with Snake is so-and-so.' Probably, in the first stages, you acted some sort of pantomime of what you yourself had done to defeat or propitiate Snake, and got your family to imitate you. Perhaps, in time, the thing would become a snake dance, and your posterity would forget what it meant and go on doing it just because it was done; and then someone would come along and be inspired to put an explanation of his own upon it—and so the game would go on *ad infinitum*.

We can hardly doubt that in those days there must have arisen conversational geniuses of a stature unapproached in historic times. A man's whole library was carried in his brain-pan; his knowledge was in the fullest sense his own, and at any moment, as the Saxon saying used to be, he could unlock this word-hoard, and draw on his resources to their fullest extent. What is stored in the memory has to be assimilated pretty thoroughly first; and when all knowledge and all wisdom has to be spoken to a listener, under peril of instant challenge, there is not the scope for confused or half-baked thinking that there is on paper. Moreover, as a listener had not only to be secured, but also retained, the talker had

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either to employ violence and put up with an unwilling audience, or else to make himself compellingly interesting. When listeners were eagerly competed for—as they must surely have been before there was any alternative of writing—talkers must at all costs have had to avoid being dull; the cave bore, unless he happened to be as formidable physically as mentally, could hardly have avoided the outer silence of a prehistoric Coventry.

We know now that the caves of the Old Stone Age contained artists of consummate genius. Evidences of their mastery have survived to this day. But we shall never know of the fireside conversations that speeded the long winter evenings, when the howl of wolves was heard in the forest, and the form of a mammoth might loom across the clearing in the moonlight. These were men of stature more goodly and brain more capacious than our own; with no books, except the walls of their cave, and no records, except the pictures with which that all too exiguous surface was adorned.

Talk must needs have been the whole of their literature, the sole vehicle of their wit and wisdom, and, except for their carving and graving tools, their unique means of self-expression. Can we doubt that they availed themselves to the full of the oppor-

tunities it provided? that they were artists of words no less than of visible form?

We need not assume that the fame of these now forgotten talkers and their sayings was wholly ephemeral. Most probably it persisted for generations. The repartees of many a Palæolithic Doctor Johnson were no doubt embalmed in tribal or racial memory. One can well imagine how this might have been done; how it would have been done among ourselves if there had been no printing press and an illiterate Boswell. We should no doubt have had commemorative dinners, in which the parts of Wilkes, Goldsmith, Mrs Thrale, and Boswell himself, would have been shared out among the company; the talk would have become a ritual, and the ritual a drama. However sacred the original sayings may have been, they probably, in the course of time, lost all resemblance to the original. You could not have prevented the actors themselves from improving on their parts, and without the written word to fall back upon, there could have been no distinguishing between the new and the old. Until at length after a run perhaps of centuries, the last curtain descended; and some final catastrophe cut the cord of memory once for all; that particular breed of men died out, or was exterminated, and nothing that had ever

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been said among them survived to tell the tale.

We have only our imaginative reconstruction on which to rely, since evidence we can have none. But we know that people must have been talking long before they ever started to write, and it is something more than conceivable that, when we first get any written record, the great days of conversation were actually over, and that the first fugitive sentences that we catch represent merely the dregs of the great debate. When the dawn of history begins to trickle through the blinds, the feast is over and the guests have gone home. We only hear the sleepy voices of those who are tidying up the room, and preparing it for the more prosaic uses of the day.

CHAPTER IV

DAWN IN EGYPT

CERTAIN it is that when words have been finally crystallized in the form of written symbols, so that we can gaze on the mummified speech of men long dead, we find conversation a fully developed and perhaps even a decadent activity. It is only of late years that we have begun to realize how gracious and urbane was the civilization that flourished, under what we now know as the Old and Middle Kingdoms, on the banks of the Nile. If ever there was a Paradise on earth it was surely here, with its unclouded sunshine, its yearly renewed abundance and its unbroken peace, behind its protecting desert. Here the centuries might pass by, and the same contented way of life still be trodden on those riverside estates whose owners loved to perpetuate its most intimate details in the walls of their tomb chambers, in some pathetic hope of continuing to enjoy it for ever after.

How incomparably more civilized than anything

we associate with country house life to-day must have been the atmosphere of those exquisitely adorned villas, with their cool porticos and palm-shaded arbours! How pleasant must have been those banquets, with the moonlight flooding the sandhills or the stars burning through the desert skies. We do not have to guess, as well we might, that they were also feasts of conversation; we know that these most ancient Egyptians valued more than bodily prowess the fair speech that is likened by Ptah Hotep to an emerald picked up by slave girls among pebbles.

Ptah Hotep? The *Cambridge Ancient History* puts his date in the twenty-ninth¹ century before Christ, a time, that is to say, when the Great Pyramids were about the same age as St Paul's is now. He has been described as the Egyptian Chesterfield, whom he resembled in being a great personage about court, and in writing for the benefit of his son. His is the oldest of books,² and yet, on the subject of conversation, so fully abreast of any subsequent time that it might even now be studied with profit. Tact and urbanity were evidently the two things most of all

¹ The thirty-sixth, according to another authority.

² There is an excellent translation by Mr Gunn in the *Wisdom of the East* series.

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needful to the talker at the Egyptian dinner-table. He is warned against a bookish parade of learning, against trying to scare off important people in argument, against a high and mighty attitude to those he might deem his inferiors in brains or social status; the dictator type, the superman who seeks to dominate others, was plainly not encouraged on the banks of the Nile.

Kindliness is the essence of Egyptian good manners; and Ptah Hotep was as firmly convinced as the Founders of Winchester School that manners maketh man. A sweet reasonableness, we gather, informed the conversation of gentlefolk in this cultured and perhaps even sophisticated society.

That the tradition had not died out with the passage of some fourteen centuries, we gather from the glimpse we have, in the book of Genesis, of that very great gentleman, the Pharaoh who had to deal with the pastoral chief, Abraham, who, no doubt judging His Egyptian Majesty by his fellow sheikhs, hit upon the expedient of passing off his handsome wife as his sister, in order that she might be received into the royal seraglio without the preliminary of making her a widow. The innocent monarch, thus tricked into violating a taboo, had brought dire trouble upon his kingdom—at least in his own estima-

tion. If he had been the sort of man that Abraham had taken him for, no doubt the whole of Jewish history would have been that of a crocodile's meal. But the Pharaoh's courtesy was equal to the situation; he merely said:

'What is this that thou hast done unto me? Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.'

The Patriarch's reply, if any, is not recorded. Even the Father of Israel must have found it a little hard to effect a dignified exit.

If that is at all a representative specimen of the Egyptian's gentleman's speech on a great occasion, we can only feel sorry that we have no specimens of his everyday talk during this immense period of peaceful civilization. Every necessary condition for the art of conversation would seem to have been present: a peaceful, orderly society; a leisured and even *tempo* of life, and yet enough of daily business—we know this from the tomb walls—to keep the wits alert and the mind occupied; an environment of tasteful beauty, even down to the smallest adjuncts of ordinary existence; an immemorial tradition of that sweetest of all courtesy, that is based on goodwill;

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and, what is perhaps the most essential of all, a high degree of respect accorded to women. We do not know the precise degree in which the ladies were permitted, or encouraged, to take their part in the general conversation; but we can hardly imagine that the stately dames whom we see carved so realistically, hand in hand with their husbands, or seated at their sides, can have failed to dominate the social atmosphere of their own houses.

On the whole we can feel safe in saying that if we could be transported back to this earliest recorded social life, we should find not only conversation in full swing, but of a standard to which most of us would find it hard indeed to rise. We can imagine Ptah Hotep himself taking these guests from the future under his benevolent wing, tactfully drawing them out and putting them at their ease, in the light of his own precept that it is shame to confuse a mean mind; or dear, impetuous Lady Nofret, whose almost articulate likeness we may behold in the Cairo Museum, alternating eager questions with the most engaging confidences; or it may be some riverside magnate enormously interested in the development of modern farming. Assuming that we could be made free of the language as well as the time, we could be assured of company and surroundings

equally delightful. What would be the verdict of our hosts on us is another matter.

It was not only in the Egyptian equivalent of Society that fair speech was prized, if we may judge from one of the earliest pieces of fiction that has come down to us, the story of the Eloquent Peasant, who was so determined to get justice for himself against a none too honest official, that he not only, in the very long run, managed to talk the officiating judges round, or down, but got such a reputation for his eloquence, that he was finally summoned to the presence of the Pharaoh, evidently a connoisseur in such matters.

But even so stable and gracious a civilization could not keep its charm for ever. Two thousand years is, after all, an amazing length for one way of life, however satisfying. The time was bound to come when a new spirit would be breathed into the still unchanging forms; when, as we read in our Bibles, the Pharaohs would have ceased to be genial, and developed into the fighting chiefs of a highly efficient imperialist tyranny. While their armies were battling in Syria, their taskmasters were busy on the home front. The even tenour of life by the Nile was broken for ever. Art became pretentious and mechanical; the old sureness of taste had departed. No Victorian

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lodging-house contained more preposterous junk than some of the things dumped in the tomb of Tutankhamen. Can we doubt that conversation likewise degenerated; and that, like the memoirs of these later Pharaohs, it tended more and more to become an inflated autobiographical chronicle of hunting and fighting prowess? The magnificent Rameses II, a not improbable candidate for the Pharaoh of the Exile, with whose colossal features we are only too familiar, must, with his monotonous self-advertisement, rank as one of the most colossal bores of history. What conversation must have been like, at *his* table, we can only too easily imagine!

‘Did I ever tell you how in Syria once, when I was cut off from my bodyguard . . .’

We must get out of our heads, once and for all, that conversation has, since the beginning of recorded time, gone on getting better and better. It is quite on the cards that, even at that beginning, its best was already over; and it is at least not inconceivable that if its golden age was that of the pictured cave, its silver age may have been that of the Nile kingdom before it degenerated into empire. More, in defect of evidence, we cannot say.

Conversation is a sea, whose tides rise and fall, and whose face is perpetually changing. In the course

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of ages we may record certain tendencies to gain or recede on the land, to warm or to freeze. But such change is in no sense progressive.

CHAPTER V

AN ART OF CONVERSATION

FOR a creature who is constantly talking, and whose enjoyment of life so largely consists of talk, man would appear to have devoted singularly little conscious attention to exploiting the possibilities of conversation. This is no doubt because he talks, as he breathes, so much as a matter of course that he forgets to think about it. Once he gets beyond or above the intimacy of conversation, it is a different matter. He thinks a great deal about his oratory. The moment he gets on his hind legs to make a speech, he is overwhelmed with self-consciousness; he turns it over in his mind for hours and days beforehand. What diner does not know how an otherwise pleasant companion may be changed to a condition of morose aloofness, by the fact that he is booked to propose the health of somebody or something at a later stage of the proceedings?

Speeches are made; talk happens. The mind, like an underground spring, is perpetually bubbling up

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audibly above the surface. The attempt to keep it under, for any prolonged time, ranks among the most inhuman of all tortures, or the sternest of all austerities. Prisoners in solitary confinement will be deterred by no threats of punishment from communicating with one another. Those who are debarred from converse with their fellows will find such compensation as they can in addressing their gods, or even themselves. But this will by no means always suffice to keep the reason on its seat; for the mind that cannot unburden itself is like an engine with a blocked safety valve: an explosion or a breakdown is bound to occur sooner or later.

It is therefore only to be expected that while the technique of oratory is developed by intensive application, in most societies with the least veneer of civilization, that of conversation should have been to such a large extent neglected. It does not come naturally to man to make an art of what he does by necessity. His three primal habits are those of breathing, eating and talking. If he omits the first, he suffocates in a matter of minutes; if the second, he starves in a matter of days; if the third, in a matter, perhaps, of years, he goes off his head. So he does all three, as he continues to live, without asking why or how.

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Or at most, he confines himself to restraining their excesses. Breathing regulates itself so exactly that there is no very obvious temptation to riotous panting; but gluttony is something obviously to be restrained, and at last promoted to the rank of a deadly sin. And experience is not long in showing that the tongue is an unruly member; that one is well advised to think before one speaks, and, moreover, that the spoken word shall correspond to fact. And so we find that the wise men of the past have been markedly less interested in making, than in bridling conversation.

‘The tongue’, says St James, ‘is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.’

That is putting it with the fervour of an ascetic Hebrew. A more worldly rendering is that of an Athenian playwright, Nicostratus, son of the great Aristophanes, who remarks that if perpetual chattering were a mark of good sense, swallows would be wiser than men.

That most world-wise of all sages, Confucius, when told that someone lacked the gift of ready speech, asked what need there was of such a gift at all:

'To stand up before men and pour forth a stream of glib words is generally to make yourself obnoxious to them. I don't know about his good-naturedness, but at any rate, what need of that gift?'¹

One could multiply such quotations indefinitely, not only from ancient but from modern sages. The advantages of silence have afforded a perpetual excuse for breaking it. It is well known how Carlyle devoted the whole of a long literary life to this theme, and how he was capable of thundering down the most garrulous of audiences in its advocacy. The more verbose the speaker the greater his need for silence in his listener; just as those domestic fiends who are perpetually clamouring for unselfishness, infallibly turn out to be egomaniacs who insist on everybody else being charmingly unselfish to *them*.

The sage has the two prime qualifications for an advocate of silence: he is fairly sure to have a private word hoard of no ordinary dimensions to unlock, and also to have grown old in its accumulation. You can't think of a young, and hardly of a reticent sage. And probably the business of putting the young in their places has been carried on by the older members of the species before there were any words to be suppressed. We have no doubt whatever, that the

¹ The Confucian Analects, v. 4. Trans. Jennings.

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Missing Link who first got the idea of descending from his ancestral trees and running about on the ground, was a youthful specimen, who called attention to his discovery by a good deal of noise, until silenced by a well-directed coconut from up aloft. The authorities, by which we mean the most certificated guessers of the hour, make a great deal of play with the supremacy of the Old Man or family patriarch, in prehistoric society. And we know what old men are like.

It is no doubt imperative to set limits to talk, and to prune even its most mellifluous periods: 'Set a watch upon my tongue', says the Psalmist, 'and keep thou the door of my lips,' and the veriest infidel will hardly question the soundness of the aspiration. But there is more to be done with talk than rationing it. The fact that we speak almost as naturally as we breathe, does not bar the possibility of reinforcing nature by art, a positive art of conversation, and not merely a discipline of restraint.

Such an art has been made even of breathing. According to those subtlest of all practical psychologists, the ancient Hindus, in the regulation of breath is the key to unlock the secrets of mind, and perhaps even of nature. There have been less elevated philosophers who have made an art of eating and drinking;

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some with the object of freeing the soul from carnal affections, others with that of exploiting them scientifically; and however much this second ideal may be condemned, there are comparatively few critics who would not rather have dined with Lucullus than with Ezekiel.

Why should talking be left out? It plays so large a part in human life, and contributes so much to its happiness, that it seems hard that it should be dismissed from consciousness with an adjuration not to talk so much. Is it not possible to take this most delightful of all activities in hand; to eliminate the friction, and still more the dullness, that are its bane; and to explore to the utmost its possibilities, for making life not only interesting but beautiful?

CHAPTER VI

THE TYRANNY OF WORDS

BUT there can be no question of an art, unless we have free use of its material. The material of conversation is words, and where, as so often happens, men are not the masters but the slaves of their words, such a thing as a good talk is out of the question; or at best, its flow is restricted to some narrow and steeply banked channel, leaving desert and soundless vast tracts of human intercourse.

Buried in some long forgotten Comic Album, there is a story about a clergyman who so far forgot his cloth, in a moment of irritation, as to curse his shadow. The result was that the shadow, being even more irritated, broke loose and went off by itself, creating terrible scandal for its ex-owner by the un-clerical actions it performed on window blinds. Words, if we are to go by the beliefs of their users, are constantly behaving in just such a way, getting detached from their meanings, and taking on a life and power of their own. It is as hard to converse

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freely with words of this kind, as it must have been to play scientific croquet at the Wonderland party, where the balls were live, and active, hedgehogs.

According to one theory, the use of words as conversational counters is one that hardly occurs to the primitive mind. Words are talismans; they are worth what they will fetch, like the parrot's 'scratch' and 'thank you'. The child uses the first sound he can stammer out: 'Ma, Ma,' to call up the most important factor of his environment, and to command her services; and so plants, in his subconsciousness, the belief that the mere act of pronouncing a word is the cause of the thing happening, and the word 'Mamma' as real as Mamma herself. Having got this notion of words and their possibilities at the back of his mind, that insatiably ambitious creature, man, devotes all his ingenuity to devising means of operating them for his own purposes, and also, logically enough, to protecting himself from being operated upon by the words of other people, thus blotting out of mind the fact that words begin and end in talk.

Conversation must be heavy going when, with every sentence you speak, you have to be on guard against letting loose some magic or violating some taboo. In some societies it is as much as life is worth to mention anybody's name. The name is a sort of

doubt, separate from, yet intimately connected with its subject; by pronouncing it you are inflicting injury, perhaps deadly, upon the material half. We gather from Sir James Frazer, who has collected an immense store of information about different sorts of taboos, that a Bogo lady, somewhere in East Africa, would think much less of presenting her husband with a pair of antlers, than of pronouncing his name. Even in brightest Bogo society one has to draw the line somewhere.

The same high authority—whose *Golden Bough*, apart from its weightier merits, constitutes a veritable Eldorado of curious gossip— informs us how the Caffre women are so hedged about with prohibitions against pronouncing this or that name, that they have got round them by inventing a special ‘women’s language’ of their own, of which the interpretation is ‘naturally very difficult’. A similar device is not unknown among naughty children, who invent harmless substitutes for words that they know the ‘grown ups’ would not allow them to use, and perhaps ask the governess, amid sinister chuckles, whether she has ever had a tiny rabbit, or been hugged by a grizzly. But this atmosphere of taboo can hardly be said to make for intelligent, as distinct from bright, conversation.

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According to some recent theorists, the prohibition in the Decalogue against taking in vain the name of Jehovah, was originally against operating with it for purposes of magic. It is at least as probable that the idea was to avoid drawing down, on the speaker and his audience, the same sort of curse that destroyed a well-meaning person who put out his hand to steady Jehovah's Ark; but in either case, the candid discussion of theological problems must have presented difficulties in ancient Palestine.

The habit of investing words with a life and independence of their own is one by no means confined to primitive societies. The old tyrannies and taboos persist, though in less obvious guise, among the most civilized. We are as yet all too far from asserting full mastery over our words, and treating them in the light of man-made conveniences.

Words, or combinations of words, are repeated, like magic incantations, as if their mere repetition provided a key to all knowledge and all mysteries. The classic instance is that of a whole city being stampeded, for interested purposes, into a riot, by the name of its patron goddess, Diana. At the moment of writing, the Suez Canal is reported to be crammed with shiploads of excited young men shouting themselves hoarse with the magic word 'Duce'. The habit

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of stentorian incantation is enormously on the increase; it has, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, become part of the spectacular technique of sport. In the Fascibolshevist Utopias of Central and Eastern Europe, it has become the compulsory substitute for free discussion. The Dictatorial bawl, magnified and multiplied by every sound-producing device, is becoming one of the most familiar features of Continental broadcast programmes; words like 'Aryan', 'Marx', 'Führer', 'Duce', are more potent than any abracadabra of the not quite so dark ages. Even in countries that retain some measure of freedom, the device of the slogan, or thought-saving incantation, is more highly esteemed for political and commercial propaganda, than any appeal to fact or reason.

Far be it from us to cavil at these latest adjuncts of civilized existence! But it is not irrelevant to point out that the worshippers of words and slogans are likely to make poor conversationalists. The bawling and talking habits do not harmoniously cohabit in the same mind; the talker who gets roused to violent and perhaps homicidal excitement by the sound of a word or slogan, does not help the conversation to flow freely. No doubt it will be replied, by the enthusiasts of the new regime, that this is all to the

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good, that the strong, silent heroes of the future will find sufficient exercise for their lungs in yelling to order, and that conversation, as in the model jails of the nineteenth century, ought to be cut down to a minimum. That may well be, if we are to assume that all progress is on the up grade—and at that we may leave it.

The fetish worship of words is by no means confined to these virile and up-to-date cults. Even in the most intellectual, not to speak of artistic, circles, incantation is perpetually being used as a substitute for thought. Things are judged, not on their own merits, but on those of their names. The narrowest of dogmatists have only to christen themselves 'free-thinkers', and label anybody who thinks differently as 'obscurantists', in order to get their dogmas accepted by those who prefer to believe without thinking; those who want to go back to the savage in art and beyond the savage in morals have only to label themselves 'moderns', to get accepted without question as messengers before the face of civilization. Such is the magic of the name!

Some fetishes are so sacred that it is hardly safe to hint at them. A candid analysis of the newspaper cult of Royalty would be no more advisable to-day, than one of the Holy Office in sixteenth-century

Seville; Naboth may blaspheme God, provided he does it in a refined enough way, but the second part of the charge is still a stoning matter. Perhaps rightly.

This brings us back to the subject of word taboos, which are by no means extinct in modern society. A conspicuous instance is the word 'cancer', which quite a number of people would go to any length of circumlocution to avoid, from some vague notion that the mere mention of the name might attract the thing, or invoke the demon; few even of the boldest swearers would make free with the Third Name of the Trinity, however reckless they might be with the other two, and this not from any sort of piety, but from fear of irrevocable and automatic damnation to a Hell in which they have long disclaimed belief.

There is no very obvious reason why a player in mixed tennis, who has stopped a ball with his belly, should be constrained to assert, falsely, that it was his stomach, except that the former and more graceful word is only not taboo when the wind does it to a sail. It is still more curious that those consciously advanced people, whose conversation is defiantly interlarded with references to what in Victorian times ranked as a Certain Place, should honour taboos on more expressive and accurate words, by employing the lying circumlocution 'lavatory'.

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No doubt taboos have their limited usefulness in civilized, no less than in savage society. A gross frankness of speech is not necessarily to be commended. Refined sensibilities may well take refuge in a discreet Latinity, from the assault of Saxon monosyllables, only too barbarously realistic. We need not apply our noses to every stink, or test emetics by quaffing them. Legend tells of a certain undergraduate, who invited his guests to a competition in story-telling, the winner to be he who could first make one of the company physically sick. That is conversation of a sort, but hardly of the sort in which most of us would elect to mingle.

There are limits to all things, and exceptions to most rules. There are some words, like some people, whose room is preferable to their company in decent society; there may even be arguments for enriching the pageantry of life with a little harmless fetish-worship. But in a general way, we may pin our faith to the maxim that conversation can never thrive so long as man remains the slave, and not the master, of his words. No company of good talkers was ever word-bound.

This is not to despise or undervalue, but rather to appreciate the spoken word at its proper worth. Words are the materials with which the artists of

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conversation unite to create masterpieces. What art has at its command materials so rich or so varied? No quarry can produce such marble, nor mine yield stones of such price, as the speaking voice has to command; the laughter of sunlight on waves is not so manifold in its joy, nor the stillness of autumn woods so luxurious in its melancholy; no breeze can flirt so lightly, nor thunderbolt strike with such annihilating force, as the sound of escaping breath, controlled and interpreted by a spirit incomparably more subtle, lodged in the brain.

That spirit, if it is to be divine in its creativeness, must be divine also in its freedom. In this empire of sound it can brook no limitation of its sovereignty: 'My words', said the Merry Monarch, 'are my own' —and it was royally spoken. These words, our subjects, have no value apart from their value for us, and we need ask no leave, human or divine, to employ, refashion, invent or discard them according to our sovereign will or caprice. Least of all need we condescend to go in fear or deference of these creatures of our breath. Our words are our own: that is the Charter of our conversational liberty.

CHAPTER VII

TALK LANGUAGE

OUR words are indeed our own; but only in the sense that an artist's materials are his own, to be used within the limits imposed by their nature. We do not carve figures in wood as we chisel them in marble; and when we try to stain glass as if we were painting on canvas, we achieve such stentorian discords as those of Victorian church windows. Our right is divine, and bound by no arbitrary commands or taboos; but he is a fool, as well as a tyrant, who pays no regard to the nature of his subject, or to the quality of his resources.

Words, words, words, are the material of our talk as they are of our speeches and writing; but there is a subtle difference in our selection and treatment of words. We do not, unless we are incurably pedantic, talk like books; and the error of the Victorian glass painters was not more gross than that of the Victorian Grand Old Man, who drove his Sovereign to distraction by habitually addressing her in private as if,

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according to her own phrase, she were a public meeting. Could all his pathetic and unrequited loyalty, with the rest of his overwhelming excellence, have ever been expected to atone, with any human woman, for such quintessential capacity for inflicting boredom?

When mankind passed beyond conversation to more formal and enduring uses of words, the stream of language burst open new channels. But the primal river of conversation continued to flow along its natural bed; talk developed on its own lines, and with its own language, subtly but perceptibly different from that of its younger sisters.

It is a language of which there is surprisingly little record, considering that it is employed to so incomparably greater an extent than those others. But this is after all no more than we should expect from the fact that there has been, up to recent years, no other way of recording talk except through the medium of writing. Though we are now beginning to develop sound recording, we have found no practicable means of applying it to conversation; and as for set speeches read into the microphone, to talk of them as 'talks' is to talk nonsense.

The art of transferring conversation to paper is so difficult as to be seldom, in fact, accomplished, without first translating the language of the tongue into

that of the pen. The writer instinctively feels that the more literally talk is transcribed, the worse it reads—nay more, the less it gives the impression of being the real thing. Nor can it, by any possibility, be the real thing, or anything like it, because, as we have already tried to convey, there is so much more to a conversation than the mere marshalling of words in a certain order: the gesture, the inflection of the voice, the expression, the surroundings, the telepathic aura of personal contact—all these must be left behind by the spoken word before it can crystallize its existence in writing. Virtue has gone out of it, and, with virtue, life.

Those of us civilians who, during the war, were honoured with the King's commission, can remember those rather farcical Boards that used to be appointed from time to time to record evidence on such momentous problems as how Private Jones came to sprain his ankle, or the lock was broken on the cookhouse door. The business of these august bodies boiled down to the translation of the confused, yet often expressive, vernacular of Thomas Atkins, into the sort of colourless jargon that finds favour in orderly rooms. 'Private Jones states that about 8.30 on the evening of the 18th ult. he was proceeding from the barracks in the direction of the Andalusia

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Cinema Hall, when he inadvertently placed his foot on a piece of orange or banana skin that caused him to fall heavily on the pavement spraining his left ankle.'

Private Jones had stated nothing of the sort; what he had really said was more like:

'Well, you see, sir, it was like this, sir. Me and Spud—I beg pardon, sir, Private Murphy—me and Private Murphy sir, we was a bit late for the pictures because . . . well sir, it was second house, and we was late, so that'd make it . . . that's right sir . . . oh no, sir, quite sober sir . . . well, not more than half a pint, sir, if you might put it that way . . . that's quite right sir, only you see sir . . .' and so on and so forth.

Even in this version I have probably somewhat touched up and clarified Private Jones's style, and certainly transformed his pronunciation; but it is enough if I have made it clear that the written word, as embodied in the report, is only a remote paraphrase of the spoken original. And necessarily so, if only because it gives Jones's own account more intelligibly than the spoken word could possibly do. There are, no doubt, dangers in the method, when it is applied, not by bored and uninterested officers, but by police officials hungry for evidence, and get-

ting bewildered and exhausted questionees to sign statements, in official jargon, conveying less what they want than what they are wanted to say. But the need for making some sort of reconstruction of the spoken word before committing it to writing, is not affected by the fact that reconstruction is a dangerous process.

Is it not, however, to those writers whose business it is to hold up a mirror to life, the novelists, the diarists, the chroniclers, that we should look for more veracious transcription of the spoken language, than from practical men with a special purpose in view? But if it is impracticable to write down words exactly as they are spoken, it is even more profoundly inartistic. Talk, unless it is elaborately formal, is a thing of loose ends, of sentences padded or broken off, of interruptions, and implied understandings. Your writer of fact or fiction has his reader to think of; he is aware, if only subconsciously, of the limitations of his medium. He, no less than our official taker of evidence, though with dexter hand, applies himself to the same task of reconstruction; he tidies up the talk; he compensates for what it has lost in the transmission, by giving the words a point and finish whose absence was not remarked by the hearer, but would be painfully apparent to the reader. And in so

doing he actually gives an illusion of greater reality.

Of course it is possible to overdo the thing grossly. Writing language comes so much more trippingly off the pen, that not even the best writers can always resist the temptation to fall into it, purely and simply, when they are recording conversation. The effect of keeping up even the semblance of talk language for any length of time is one that few writers are capable of sustaining. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, incarnate as Dr Watson, is a case in point. The conversations in the consulting room overlooking Baker Street begin with all the realism the author is capable of imparting; but when Mr Holmes's clients get down to brass tacks and narrative, they put off their talking selves and allow their evidence to be doctored by the synthesis of two beloved physicians, in their best, joint, literary style.

Thus when, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Dr James Mortimer first enters the room, the conversation goes slickly enough:

- ‘ “I would not lose that stick for the world.”
- ‘ “A presentation, I see?”
- ‘ “Yes, sir.”
- ‘ “From Charing Cross hospital?”
- ‘ “From one or two friends there on the occasion of my marriage.”

“Dear, dear, that’s bad!”

But the visitor has only been introduced in order to state the problem for Sherlock Holmes and the reader, and to do so in the style that the latter at least will find easiest to follow. As the story is long and complicated, the author, with great literary tact, avails himself of the device of making the Doctor read at length, first from a venerable manuscript, and then from a current newspaper, so that he has only a very short piece to say himself; but, even so, he has to be translated into writing language. To cite three sentences, in which I have taken the liberty of italicizing the words that to my own pretty certain knowledge, and my reader’s, also, if he will give his attention to the matter, no country G.P. would ever have *said*:

‘I can well remember driving up to his house in the evening, some three weeks *before the fatal event*. He *chanced* to be at his hall door. I had *descended* from my gig and was standing in front of him when I saw his eyes fix themselves over my shoulder, and stare past me with *an expression of the most dreadful horror*.’

This is not necessarily wrong. The novel, no less than the stage, has its conventions, and the detective novel, in particular, is an elaborate make-believe, like a chess problem in which we agree to swallow

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the situation whole and work out the solution according to the rules. So there is really no reason why we should not, for our own convenience, accept one convention the more, that of allowing all narrative statements to be delivered by the author himself in the name of his puppet.

But then, what author ever does set himself to the task of recording the spoken word with photographic—or gramophonic—literalness?

An author, for one thing, has something better to do. The talk of real life, served up like an uncooked dish, would be extremely indigestible. When we read a novel of Dickens, we no doubt have the impression of seeing the people of his time with our mind's eye, as we might have seen them with our natural eyes, and of listening to their authentic conversation. That is the supreme triumph of art, the spell cast over us by the master magician. But if we could step back for eighty or a hundred years, we should be woefully disillusioned if we expected to find people talking like Micawber, for instance, or Sam Weller, or Mr Bumble. Even if any of these characters had originals in the mind of Dickens, and we had an exhaustive record, in shorthand, of everything that any one of them said, during the whole of a waking day, the result would assuredly be dis-

appointing beyond belief, nor should we stand the least chance of recognizing our old favourite. Dickens knew, well enough, that when Micawber was due to speak, readers of those serial instalments of his novels, that now fetch such staggering prices, would expect something of a definitely Micawberish nature, to equal or cap all previous performances. To have put down quite literally the trivial, incomplete, and relatively commonplace utterances that no doubt issued from the lips of old Mr Dickens—or whoever was Micawber's original—on nine out of ten occasions, or even to display his gems of conversation unpolished and rough hewn, would have been sheer literary suicide; it would, moreover, have been villainously bad writing.

There are some writers who go so far as to invent a language of their own, in which they not only write when speaking in their own persons, but into which all the speeches of their characters are translated. George Meredith was such a writer; Henry James another. Or—if you want a present-day writer—who could possibly mistake the creator of the following in which I have left out all but the actual words of the dialogue:

“We want dinner and a room for the night.”

“*Darling, am I going to be seduced?*”

“I’m afraid you are. Do you mind terribly?”

“Not so much as all that. Charmed, I’m sure.”

It is a fair test, because in few self-respecting novels of the up-to-date intelligentsia do the characters lack constancy in seducing and giving themselves in seduction; nor is the event one that they fail to discuss.

Would the veriest tyro plank for Mr James Joyce as author? Cloacina forbid! Would he venture upon Mr Aldous Huxley—the earlier and more frivolous Mr Huxley of *Antic Hay*? Surely a biological absurdity. Or stands it within the prospect of belief that any character of Mr Wyndham Lewis could seduce with such extreme absence of sophistication? Could Mr Michael Arlen thus discard all his fig-leaves? Dare we credit such talk to the brightest young creatures of Mr William Gerhardi or Mr Eric Linklater? Does not there flash upon the brain, simultaneously with the reading of the passage, the name of the actual and only possible creator, Mr Evelyn Waugh—a Mr Waugh as yet unfortified by the rites of the True Church?

But these, you may say, are books; you are forgetting the stage, on which you may hear conversation from living lips, with all its adjuncts complete, and no need for translating to paper. But the drama

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is no more than the written word memorized, and the raw material of conversation needs still more drastic transformation before it can become the finished product of the stage. This will hardly be disputed by that multitude, not to be numbered, of the literate obscure, each of whom has, hidden away in his private archives, the manuscript of a play that, by some cruel conjunction of circumstances, just failed to get accepted. Those of them who sought instruction in the job, must have had it impressed on them that not a sentence, or a word, can justify its insertion in dialogue, unless it definitely helps the play forward. It is like one of those Gothic buildings in which the effect is achieved with the utmost economy of stone, and every inch of unnecessary surface or thickness is eliminated. That the actors would be instructed to come on to the stage and talk in the diffuse and unregulated fashion of real life, is as likely as their being allowed to lounge about before the footlights, discussing their private affairs in hearing of the audience.

And indeed, the drama of the past has not only recognized, but consecrated, this artificiality, by making its characters talk in verse, or even through masks. Efforts to make the modern drama realistic have only succeeded in altering the nature of the illusion. Could

anything be more elaborately artificial than the psychological patterns of Ibsen? Could anything be less like life than the Shavian conversazione of Mr Bernard Shaw's mouthpieces?

So that we have to recognize that the language of conversation is neither quite the same as that of writing, nor of oratory. But the streams, though separate, do not follow exactly parallel courses: sometimes they are wide apart, sometimes two of them will approach near enough for one to receive the other's overflow.

Too near is as bad as too far. The greater polish and scope of writing have made it a constant endeavour of pedagogues and pedants to educate people into talking like books. The result is to put conversation into a strait waistcoat, to fetter it with inhibitions, and to deprive it of all sparkle and spontaneity. It is strange that a self-conscious formality should be inculcated as the foundation of that good breeding, whose hallmark is its entire freedom from self-consciousness. Again, it is a not uncommon weakness of actors and public speakers, to drop into declaiming their conversation; as it is recorded of that great tragic actress, Mrs Siddons, that she would pronounce the words:

‘I called for porter, boy: you brought me beer,’

with as sublime an intonation as if she had been acting Queen Catherine of Aragon before her judges. Nor is Mr Gladstone the only orator who has persisted in haranguing private individuals as if they were public meetings.

But the principle works both ways. The advice to write just as if you were putting the thing to a friend in conversation would, if followed, be the death of literature. There are harmonies in prose of a complexity and elaboration that would be merely tiresome in talk, but which are the very crown and flower of writing. Even in the spacious days of the sixteenth century, the long-drawn, polysyllabic musings of Sir Thomas Browne would have been hard to digest at the dinner table; while we can imagine the strain imposed upon visitors to Walter Pater's rooms, if he had talked at them in the style of his essays, painfully hesitating while he weighed the possibilities of each word. And the very idea of a conversation in the literary manner of Miss Gertrude Stein is enough to set the brain reeling.

It was Mr Arnold Lunn, I believe, who quoted the very sensible comment of a schoolboy on an episcopal sermon:

‘I like a ruddy bishop to be a ruddy bishop.’

And, he might have added, a ruddy writer to be

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full-bloodedly well literary; an actor stagily theatrical; and an orator to have no shame in his liaison with rhetoric, that noble mistress.

The art of conversation has its own technique and its own traditions. It owes no allegiance to the canons of any sister art; it claims no sovereignty beyond its own frontiers. Its language can be translated, but never reproduced, on the boards, or the rostrum, or the printed page. Its devotees can follow no more admirable precedent than that of John Tanner, in *Man and Superman*, to go on talking—just talking.

CHAPTER VIII

CONVERSATIONAL SUPREMACY— ATHENS

WHEN the ordinary Englishman talks of the King's English, it never occurs to him to doubt whether the phrase applies equally to English as it is spoken, and English as it is written. And if you point out to him that English, as it is spoken by a Dorsetshire shepherd or a Durham miner, is different both in idiom and pronunciation from the written English of a *Times* leader, he will reply to the effect that the spoken dialects, in so far as they diverge from the written standard, are debased English, and not of His Majesty's mintage; just as in my undergraduate days, a sententious little manual of instruction for Freshmen enjoined you never to affect a provincial accent, on the ground that it would 'give you away'. Which indeed it would, in that rigorously critical and conservative polity of youth.

But the relations between the two languages, those of talk and writing, were not always settled so easily. In the profoundly original civilization of China, the

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written script developed on its own lines, and so far from the pen setting the standard for the tongue, coined a language of its own whose signs had to be seen to be understood, and whose sound equivalents would have been capable of so many interpretations to the unaided ear as to be hardly intelligible, even to scholars. To master book language needed a special education, and even so, the literary Chinaman regarded it as a thing to be seen and not heard.

It was reserved, however, for the brightest and most brilliant of human civilizations, that of classical Greece, positively to assert the supremacy of the spoken over the written word, as the vehicle of thought and beauty. We all know that rhetorical question put by Lord Byron to the Greeks of his own day.

*Ye have the letters Cadmus gave;
Think you he meant them for a slave?*

Byron did not pause for a reply, nor would it have occurred to him that it could have been other than in the negative; but to an Athenian of the Golden Fifth Century it might have seemed—as to the greatest of his philosophers it certainly did seem—that to put the living word into the cold storage of writing, was the way of mental and spiritual slavery.

There is a parable in that most charming of Plato's

dialogues, the 'Phaedrus', about the Egyptian god, Thoth, whose speciality it is to invent every sort of art from astronomy to diceing, and who finally adds writing to the list. It is his habit to submit the results, for criticism and approval, to the head god, the Theban Ammon. This august personage proves unexpectedly snubbing about the latest discovery, whose effect will be to make people neglect their own memories and trust to the written word; just as now-days it might be said that the effect of broadcasting is to extirpate musicians in order to create listeners. These disciples of Thoth, the superior god forebodes, will hear much and assimilate nothing; they will be ignoramus claiming omniscience, and in consequence, bores.

It is hard for any modern reader to take this seriously; Socrates, into whose mouth it is put, must surely, he thinks, have been pulling Phaedrus's leg. But the context makes it clear that the old fellow, and Plato, speaking through his mouth, were never more serious in their lives.

Books are like pictures, that alter not. You can't question them. The only fruitful words are those which take root in, and live from, the soul; that can defend and justify themselves; that live and grow—as symbols on parchment never can—to perfection.

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God forbid that we should swell the chorus of commentators, who execute eternal judgment on Plato by falling on this passage, in the frozen and defenceless condition in which he so inconsistently caused it to be preserved, and dinging into his unresponsive ears the extent and nature of his error. What alone concerns us is that this point of view, so perverse to our notions as to be wildly paradoxical, could be maintained, in all seriousness, by the greatest of Athenian philosophers, and would not have struck the educated Athenian citizen as eccentric. To such inveterate talkers as the Greeks, the spoken word may well have seemed the vital and ideal method of transmitting thought, and any attempt to supersede it by the dead language of writing impiously absurd.

The spirit of Greek civilization is one of a vitality so intense and pulsating as to be almost beyond our conception. To step from the long Egyptian room in the British Museum into that containing the Nereid statues, and thence to the Elgin marbles, is to anticipate the experience of the resurrection. We know that this Greek vitality bore fruit in a luxurious rankness of weeds no less than of flowers; that Greek life, in the raw, was far from being an embodiment of its ideal restraint and harmony. But even those critics of the modern fashion, whose self-respect commits

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them to proving how sour are the grapes of a classical education, will be hard put to it to deny that Greek civilization was uniquely, incredibly alive.

It was not a Greek, but a Hellenizing Jew, who crystallized that vitality in a sentence: 'The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life.' It was just that consciousness that made the Greek instinctively prefer the spoken to the written word. Talk was alive; it was in perpetual motion and, when united to the noble art of dialectic, in perpetual developing motion. Let us put it in the most modern way, by saying that talk lives in the time dimension: unlike writing—the Greek would no doubt add—which is fixed and frozen for ever. And here we may legitimately join issue, since our greater experience of books shows that these too may have a life and even a growth of their own. The adventures of Aristotle in the Middle Ages, and of Plato himself during and after the Renaissance, surpass anything recorded in their biographies; and when the sun has cooled down enough for eternal night to engulf everything human, the last book to issue from the last freezing press may well be someone's discovery of the real Hamlet.

The cult of the spoken word was no empty theorizing. We may fairly describe the Greeks as the most wholeheartedly conversational folk that ever lived;

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they seem to have been hardly capable of taking any action without discussing it first. As Mr Gladstone, an authority second to none on the subject of debate, wrote of the Homeric Age: 'The voice and the sword are the twin powers by which the Greek world is governed; and there is no precedence between them.' To think out a course of action was to thrash it out in discussion; and that pattern of heroic *savoir faire*, that supremely representative Greek, Odysseus, excelled in nothing so much as his talent for talking anybody round, from a charming young princess to a member of that race of one-eyed ogres, the clinching proof of whose barbarism was their incapacity for discussion in assemblies.

With the exception of those defiantly self-conscious experimenters in military asceticism, the Spartans, the Greeks continued as they had begun, the same voluble, quick-witted, excitable, unscrupulous conversationists and debaters that they had been in their heroic age. They had made the new and intoxicating discovery of the unfettered reason and its possibilities. We can hardly imagine the joyousness of that adventure, we, whose idea of a philosopher is that of a bookish pedagogue, refining upon the refinements of predeceased word-spinning. To the Greek philosopher nothing less would suffice than for his eyes to behold

the goddess, the living truth, in all her naked beauty; and this in spite of the fact that the Greeks had as well-deserved a reputation for lying as any people of antiquity.

Their philosophy, like their justice and statesmanship, was hammered out of talk. There was, at any rate during the Golden Age of the fifth century, no hardening into dogmatic orthodoxy. 'Truth', in the words of Professor Butcher, 'was a Proteus taking ever new shapes, a manifold and shifting thing, whose secret must be extorted by skill and patience, by the close grappling of dialectic, by the give and take of argument. No written exposition could reproduce the full play and infinite elasticity of Thought.'¹

It was only such an age that could have crowned its achievement with the personality of Socrates, that purely conversational sage, who, unlike his apostle Plato, practised what he preached, and made not the least attempt to immortalize himself, or his words, in writing. The life of Athens, of which he, and his philosophy, were part, was all in all to him; to mould and influence it, there and then, by personal contact, was the limit of his ambition, and his hope of earthly immortality. To formulate a system, and to bequeath

¹ *Studies of the Greek Genius*, p. 187.

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it, embalmed like a mummy, for the edification of remote posterity, would almost certainly have struck him as an absurd, if not an impious, thing to do.

And so he went about, buttonholing everybody he could get to listen to him, sharpening their minds by contact with his own, and conducting a psycho-analysis, in the dry light of reason, of their dearest prejudices and preconceptions. Such mental vivisection, however salutary, is seldom agreeable to its victims; and it is no small tribute to the charm and courtesy that seem to have impressed everybody who came into contact with Socrates, that he should have attained to a ripe old age before anybody thought of silencing him with the hemlock.

Just as we have been taught to think of all substance as being composed of insubstantial energy, so we might think of the Greek city as a focus of creative vitality, developing, changing, and fluctuating, from moment to moment, by dint of the incessant conversational activity of its human units. Never was action so entirely the product of talk. Even when a division of Greek mercenaries, variously recruited, found itself isolated in the heart of Mesopotamia, in the midst of enemies, without maps and without generals, it instinctively took charge of itself: formed itself into a sort of moving city; got itself

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together to discuss its difficulties and to choose its leaders; and by dint of argument and persuasion as much as fighting, accomplished that wonderful march home, the success of which laid bare the essential weakness of the great Persian Empire.

Except by the banks of the Eurotas, and there only among a community with the last vestiges of a civilized soul drilled out of it, there was no room for the strong, silent man in Greece. It is small wonder that Carlyle, that evangelist of silence, should have been significantly silent in his works about everything Greek. Probably, in his heart of hearts, the sage of Ecclefechan must have thought of the Athenian civilization as one that, like Mr Clerihew Bentley's George III, 'Never ought to have occurred.'

And no doubt the devil's advocate might have had his own case to put against this extraordinary verbal fluency that was the result of two or three Greeks being gathered together. Conversation, even at Athens, even with Socrates himself, must not be thought of as one unending Platonic dialogue. Plato, in spite of his views on writing, was himself a writer and, being also an artist, a writer up of conversation. Perhaps the loveliest of all his descriptions is that of the dinner party, at which the theme of discussion was love, and at which each of the guests, the cream

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of intellectual Athens, delivered his contribution, raising to a loftier height and driving deeper the foundations of an edifice of thought that, completed by Socrates himself, stands throughout time for as consummate an embodiment of truth in beauty as the Parthenon itself.

No sooner is this, the loveliest tribute ever paid to love, completed, than in bursts that amazing young blood, Alcibiades, far gone in liquor, and bringing along his flute girl of the evening, but with his tongue loosened to confirm the immortality of Socrates, by the most inspired tribute ever paid by a worldling to a thinker. Then everything is thrown into confusion by a party of gate-crashers, some slave, probably tipsy himself, having left the door open. Drinking waxes fast and furious; all order is broken up; some of the guests drift away, others lie sprawling on their couches, blind to the world; and when dawn begins to light up the room, one of them, opening his eyes, sees that 'Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates had alone stood it out, and were still drinking out of a great goblet which they passed round and round. Socrates was disputing between them. The beginning of it Aristodemus said he didn't remember because he was asleep; but it ended by Socrates forcing them to confess

that the same person was able to compose both tragedy and comedy, and that the foundations of both are the same.'

And then, having talked these last two survivors fairly under the table, the redoubtable old gentleman stumps off to the Lyceum, where he has a wash, and proceeds to spend the whole day in his accustomed manner—talking; only arriving home in the evening, where no doubt he at last finds his conversational match in the sorely tried Xantippe.

Now, that this most remarkable—save one only—of all recorded meals, did actually take place—and how signally Plato beats our social reporters at their own game!—who can doubt? But that the conversation does not owe more than half of its brilliance to the reporter's imagination, or that this was the common form of Athenian dinner tables, who can believe? For the guests to have taken their turn at praising love, on this particular occasion, is, of course, entirely consistent with what is implied in the statement about order having been broken up after, and therefore having prevailed before, the gate-crashing irruption; the thing must have been deliberately contrived, and ranks as the first recorded instance of after-dinner speaking in the sense too dreadfully familiar to modern ears.

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A more everyday occurrence is the kind of dinner described by that capable but thoroughly matter-of-fact officer, Xenophon—a dinner graced not only by the presence of Socrates, but also that of a gentleman who goes about sponging dinners in consideration of his talents as a low comedian, and of a cabaret troupe consisting of a certain Syracusan and his talented little boy and girl. The main interest of the proceedings is provided by the partially successful attempt of Socrates to divert the attention of the guests from these counter-attractions to his own conversation. At last the unfortunate Syracusan, finding his best turns a frost, loses his temper, and says, in effect:

‘I say, old man—don’t they call you Socrates the cogitator?’

‘And if they do, my good sir? Would you rather be called the opposite?’

‘That’s as it may be. But you’re supposed to cogitate about things that are above your head.’

‘The gods, for instance?’

‘Gods! Not you! Wasting time, with a lot of good-for-nothing twaddle that’s above your own head and everybody else’s.’

‘Exactly! Above my head—where else do you expect one to look for gods? I am sorry if this bores

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you, but you would insist on being answered, you know.'

'Talk about something else, Socrates! Tell us how far a flea jumps . . .'

At this point some tactful fellow guest succeeds in diverting the conversation, but it is pleasing to record that the final turn, a decidedly *risqué* performance by the two children, of *Bacchus and Ariadne*, is voted on all hands a huge success. Socrates, as usual, sticks it out to the bitter end, and finally persuades the last remaining diners to join him in a doubtless conversational early morning stroll.

Such was life in this talking, thinking, changing, incessantly creative Athens; life that flowered in talk, and talked itself away! For the Golden Age of Athens lasted for less than half a century; and then the city of art and intellect, that had held all the winning cards in its hand, allowed its power to crash before the bludgeon blow of beef-witted Sparta. For the free Athenian citizens, once their tongues got wagging, were capable of talking themselves into any folly and any crime. They could persuade themselves into flinging away their grand fleet and army in a wild-cat project of overseas Empire; and when they had almost miraculously restored the situation by the greatest naval victory since Salamis, they could talk

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themselves hysterical enough to murder the whole body of their victorious admirals; finally they could talk, or be talked, into the belief that their supreme talker, Socrates, was corrupting all their young men, and ought to be put out of the way.

No life lived at so intense a pitch could hope to stabilize itself. If Athens could pack into half a century what other civilizations could not have accomplished in a millennium, it was a small matter that she could not hold the course, at quite the same pace, for the ensuing laps, and that she should have declined, by gradual stages, from a creative to a dilettante civilization. The harvest of the spoken word had been garnered in her golden age; and when shall mankind reap such another?

CHAPTER IX

CONVERSATION WITHOUT WOMEN —THE GREEK EXPERIMENT

IT borders on the tragic, if we look upon the Athenian as the supreme example of a conversational civilization, that it should have wantonly handicapped itself by depriving conversations of its feminine, and fertilizing, element. Almost of set purpose, it would seem, for even the freedom-loving Athenians were reactionaries, where the freedom of women was concerned. In their own heroic age, things had been very different. In the model family of Olympus, the goddesses were quite on a par with the gods, and the Fifth Century Athenian never seems to have been struck by the inconsistency of his own attitude with his worship of an Amazon and a blue-stocking. Ladies like Clytemnestra, Medea, Helen, and Penelope, seem to have been fully as capable as any man of making their influence felt; and in comparatively recent times, there had been poetesses like Sappho and Corinna. But Greece, in spite of her triumph

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over the Persians, seems to have deliberately turned her face eastward in this matter of her women.

With any other people, this would have been a decisive bar to conversational development. Talk that is confined to one sex lacks the sympathetic intimacy that makes it fully creative. It is clogged with inhibitions. Deep down in every man's nature is a tendency to regard every other man as a potential enemy; just as every woman tends to think of every other woman as a possible rival. There is an invisible armour that man puts on against man and woman against woman; deep below the surface of their conscious minds there is wariness, suspicion, restraint. They may talk to each other, more volubly than they would to one of the opposite sex, but that is by no means the same thing as talking freely. There are always those invisible barriers.

Besides, there is the disadvantage about one-sex talk that there is about inbreeding: it lacks contrast. The interplay of the male and female principles, that is productive even in machinery, is most of all fruitful in the invisible world of the mind. The positive must connect with the negative; that which conceives must join with that which receives, for the creative impulse to be born. There is no doubt something feminine in every man, as there is masculine in every woman,

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to oil the wheels of intercourse even between members of the same sex—but can there be enough to eliminate friction?

That the answer to this question could have been an emphatic 'yes' is the supreme proof of Greek, and particularly Athenian, originality. When the Athenian of the fifth century waxed eloquent about love, he would almost certainly be thinking, not of the love of youth for maid, still less of spouse for spouse, but of the bond uniting youth to youth, or man to boy. They were—even the noblest and most spiritual of them—perfectly innocent of shame about it. Socrates himself undoubtedly thought of such love as the sort best calculated

*Not only to subdue the base in man,
But teach high thought, and honourable deeds,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.*

And we must remember that the great Sappho had been as passionate, though less spiritual, a devotee of love within the limits of her own sex.

The mere statement of these things affronts one of the most sacrosanct of present-day taboos; and justice is not one of the virtues fostered by the taboo cult. We are probably inclined to lay too exclusive a stress on the purely sensual or—as we should say—crim-

inal element in such intercourse. That the Greek, when he thought of physical love, associated the idea as naturally as we do with love between the sexes, a passage, with which Xenophon rounds off his dinner party description, by indicating the effects of that final cabaret turn on certain of the married guests, brings out too clearly to bear quotation; and while it would be childish to expect that any other sort of passionate love could have been maintained at a constant Platonic level, it is at least evident that to Plato himself, and to Socrates, the spiritual bond was all that mattered, and any lapse into the physical a tiresome and stupid irrelevancy, worthy of Alcibiades in the worst of his many moods.

To us, at any rate, the naughtiness of the Athenians, more or less, is a matter of no present concern; but their attempt to build up a conversational society by side-tracking feminine influences, and relying, in its stead, on a cultivated and passionate sympathy between man and man, is of the highest possible interest. How far, we should like to know, did that experiment succeed? How far is it possible to reap the full harvest of masculine vigour and intellectuality by creating an artificial substitute for feminine sympathy?

Here, again, we are faced with the almost complete absence of any reliable record. We should be paying

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a poor compliment to Plato if we supposed him incapable of writing up the most hopeless conversation into immortal dialogue. We can only say that his account must have had some foundation and some plausibility. No modern author, even if he were to combine the respective talents of Lord Russell and Mr Noel Coward, would be able to carry conviction for a really illuminative dialogue about love, conducted by a house party of fox-hunters in the Pytchley neighbourhood, or on the art of war by a symposium of British higher commanders somewhere in Flanders, in 1917.

After all, we find nothing like Plato in Xenophon, and in Xenophon's account we do find certain only too frequent accompaniments of exclusively male intercourse. Even in the atmosphere of Greek paganism, it is difficult to believe that a mixed society would have been quite so gross in its style of conviviality. The incident of Socrates and the Syracusan shows that when there was no Socrates to put in his oar, the attractions of high discourse were as nothing to those of low comedy; and it is evident that the room of the ladies was not uncommonly filled by the charming flute girls, whose professional accomplishments were by no means exclusively musical. Above all, it was evident that the wheels of masculine conversation

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required to be lubricated with unlimited potations to make them turn freely. Even Plato makes it clear that the gentlemen who, at five in the morning, or thereabouts, conceded the argumentative honours to Socrates, only did so because they were too gloriously fuddled to pursue the subject.

Besides, it is evident that the always resourceful Athenians were already, even at their greatest period, beginning to experiment with the means of bringing back the feminine touch into the conversation. If their own wives and daughters were specialized to the business of suckling children and conducting domestic economy behind closed doors, there was an alternative in the *Hetaira*, a word that literally means companion—ladies whose sole function in life was to give pleasure. And after all, could there be any greater pleasure to the cultivated Athenian than that of talk? He might not have bothered to educate his lady house-keeper, but an uneducated companion would bore him to distraction. For the companionship of the sexes was capable of being cultivated artistically in that city of all the arts. Among the brightest of the galaxy of bright spirits by which the age was adorned, shines that of the Ionian Aspasia, the only person to whom that greatest of all Athenian statesmen, Pericles, ever opened the hidden depths of his mind.

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All Athens thronged to this lady's *salon*, an institution that she may be said to have invented. Socrates was one of her lions—he remembered long afterwards how she used to quote parts of Pericles's immortal oration over the Athenian dead. There were some, even, who went so far as to credit her with having composed it; which at least shows of what she was thought capable. And there were husbands who brought along their wives, doubtless by way of improving their minds by association with the great courtesan.

Athens had set herself a problem that even her genius could not solve. She had pinned her whole faith to the spoken word, she had elected to make talk the motive power of her civilization; but she had cut herself off from that equal participation of the sexes without which the marriage of minds can never be properly consummated. She tried to find a substitute by infusing passion into masculine comradeship; but she was defying nature too fundamentally for the experiment to have more than a transient success. And so, having excluded the ladies from the conversation, she was forced to open a side door to another kind of lady, a more hopeful attempt at a solution, and one destined to be tried again.

But the obvious and natural solution, that of allow-

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ing the ladies to mix with their menfolk, without qualifying for it by becoming their mistresses, was still in the future.

CHAPTER X

THE SILENT EAST

WE are now able to see why, among by far the greater part of the human race, the free development of an art of conversation has been as much out of the question as the fertilization of flowers without insects. What even the Athenians could not accomplish, it would be idle for peoples less gifted to attempt. Talk that is restricted to one sex must be a stunted and starved thing at best.

And yet how could it be otherwise, when sex itself is so hedged about with restrictions? Modern research is at last beginning to make us acquainted with some part of the unbelievable tragi-comedy of man's attempts to comprehend the mystery of his having, in the beginning, been created male and female. His animal ancestors had the advantage over him of being able to take sex more or less in their stride; though some animal customs, like that of the hornbeam in sealing up his consort in the nest until the eggs are hatched, would seem absurd enough to

be human. But the animal is preserved from the higher beastliness by his inability to reflect, whereas over man, the mystery of birth and growth has exercised an obsessive fascination. What is it makes the corn come up out of the seed? And in what way can this mysterious force be worked or propitiated? No cruelty is too monstrous to perpetrate, no suffering too dire to be endured, in the attempt. Even more awful, more mysterious, is the power that is lodged in one half of the human species of creating new men, a power which manifests itself in ways, and with accompaniments, so strange. It might be said that the real fall of Adam was when he lost the power of looking Eve in the face, or the body, as a fellow human being. Sometimes he worshipped her as a goddess; at others he regarded her with panic fear as the vehicle of occult power, and exploited against her the one advantage of which he was sure, that of his superior physical strength. He even made grotesque attempts to appropriate her power to himself, by going through the whole pantomime of her accouchement in his own person. There was, in their infinite and fantastic variety, but one constant element in his relations to women: they were always the result of some theory he had formed about these creatures so like himself, and yet so mysteriously different. It was never a

simple comradeship or division of labour; it was always a problem that called for solution—the eternal sex problem.

In whatever way that problem may have been solved, whether by worshipping women, or defeating their magic, burning them at the stake, or keeping them shut up behind closed doors, the one thing that is incompatible with any solution is to mingle with them freely and naturally in conversation. To do that you have not got to solve the problem, but to shelve it. You cannot have a really satisfactory talk when you are propitiating a goddess or exorcising a witch; you cannot converse, when you are tongue-bound by all sorts of man-made inhibitions. The first condition of mixed conversation is that propounded, in a different connection, by Polonius:

Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. ✓

It follows that the historian of conversation would have to pass over, with the most cursory mention, the majority even of civilized peoples. He would find, in particular, that portion of the earth's surface to which we commonly refer as the East, except when it becomes the very Far or Ancient East, marked off as a no-woman's-land, a tract of conversational sterility. There flourish on the one hand the cult of mother and the fertility goddesses, with their wild,

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orgiastic rites; on the other the seraglio, the suttee, and the denial of a female soul.

If we take the account given in their own Scriptures of the Hebrews of Palestine, we shall find very much what we find in the East to-day, a talk that is voluble enough, but confined almost entirely within the bounds of one family or sex. The two typical places of conversation are, with the men, the gate, and with the women, the well. The gate was the place of justice and public business; the husband of a good woman, we are told, is known in the gate when he sits among the elders of the land. There must, we gather, have been occasional tension, when heads of families, that for one cause or another were at loggerheads, were members of the circle—on such occasions it was as well to have a brood of sturdy sons in reserve. But the circle certainly did not include the wife, or any other woman. The talk must have been of a grave and sententious nature, interlarded, perhaps, with sentences of pithy wisdom, such as the East still prizes—very different from the chatter at the well-side which was, and is to this day, the recognized centre for the exchange of feminine gossip. But as for mixed conversation, the sympathy of all right-minded Orientals would certainly have been with that Mr Worldly Wiseman, the Son of Sirach, in

his advice: 'Sit not in the midst of women, for from garments cometh forth a moth and from woman a woman's wickedness.'

In the matchlessly vivid and intimate presentation of Oriental life that the Old Testament affords, it is remarkable how small a part is played by conversation of any kind. We find nothing comparable to the Greek urge to talk everything out; the Hebrew preferred to have divine authority for his decisions. 'Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from trouble,' was the advice fathered on his wisest king; advice that would have been rejected with contumely in Athens. The Jew had not the Greek faith in the efficacy of the spoken—and human—word; his wisdom was oracular, not dialectic. He might, if old enough, lay down the law at feasts, provided he bore in mind the sound precept, 'hinder not music: pour not out talk where there is a performance of music, and display not thy wisdom out of season'.

It is a pity that we have no knowledge of what passed in private between David and Jonathan, or between David and his vizier, Achitopel, when they 'Took sweet counsel together and walked in the house of God as friends'—for David would seem to have been more a Hellene than a Hebrew in his capacity

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for passionate friendship. Still more interesting would it be to have the record of the conversation that Queen Balkis of Sheba, whose rank enabled her to set aside the customary taboos, thought it worth while coming all the way from the Yemen, or Ethiopia, to have with King Solomon. Rabbinical and Moslem tradition has done its best to fill the gap, by making Her Majesty pose sex conundrums of what, even in those days, must have been rather embarrassing frankness, all of which Solomon floors without hesitation or blushing. It is at least as likely that the two sovereigns may have been enjoying a long, leisurely, Oriental haggle over the precise terms of a trade agreement. But, where nothing can be known, we are free to accept the simplest as the most profitable version, that the wisest of kings did actually succeed in defying all Oriental precedent by conversing freely, on a footing of equality, with a lady capable of prizes his wisdom so highly as to come from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear it.

It needed a Greater than Solomon to set conversation on a more fruitful way, by making a clean sweep of Oriental taboos about sex, and treating all God's children on a footing of perfect spiritual equality. The Platonic friendship, which neither Plato nor Socrates is ever known to have formed in actual

practice, came perfectly naturally to Christ, who conversed and fraternized with women as freely as with men, and indeed found His women stauncher than His men friends in the hour of supreme trial. But the message of Christ never struck deep roots in Oriental soil, and indeed few genuine Orientals could have seriously conceived of the idea of looking on a presentable woman without lusting after her. And yet there can be no question of a man's conversing freely with a woman with whom he is committing adultery in his heart.

It was in the West that, after many vicissitudes, Christ's teaching and example were destined to bear fruit; and yet even that Evangelist of genius, who opened the doors of the West to Christianity, was incapable of so revolutionary a departure as that of bisexual intercourse on a basis of unconstrained equality. The fussy regulations laid down by Paul of Tarsus for his first missionary churches, have left their trail over the whole course of Christian civilization, and to-day there are authorities of the Church who are incapable of beholding a female neck or elbow uncovered, without getting as excited about it as any pasha of old Stamboul. So hard is the spirit of the harem, though scotched, to kill.

India of the purdah and suttee; China with the

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crushed feet and ceremonial submissiveness of its women; Islam, with its veils and polygamy and male monopoly of the soul—to which of these great civilizations shall we look for the free co-operation of both sexes in building up an art of conversation? There have been sententious discourses of sages with their disciples, ceremonious intercourse of tent and divan, tongues loosened in the feast, gossip and intrigue of the seraglio, gossip of the well-side and clamour of the market-place; but to what end, when the stream of conversation has been split in two, and the halves have become like those rivers that waste themselves in the desert, without ever finding the sea?

CHAPTER XI

BACCHUS LUBRICATOR

THOUGH mixed talk is unquestionably the best, all talk cannot be mixed; there must always be converse of man with man and woman with woman, in due season and for appropriate ends. If the mingling of the sexes were to take place all the time, the whole advantage of it would be lost; men and women would tend to an increasing similarity; the fertilizing contrast of minds would be lost, and with it the impulse to creation. Better than that the harem and the feast of comrades! Better the meatiest taproom and silliest teacup chatter, than hermaphrodite drooling of sex neuters in homogeneous concourse!

What must be, must be; and since the conversation of men with each other is necessarily handicapped by lack of that indefinable quickening that comes from the mingling of the sexes, it was only to be expected that masculine ingenuity should have done its best to make up in other ways for the deficiency. We have seen how the Greeks struck out the

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boldest line of all, by exploiting the passionate friendship; but that line led nowhere. To the Christian civilization of the West the whole idea was profoundly repugnant; while in the East, desire of the body knows no distinction of sex, and the Platonic sublimation does not exist.

Ever since the dawn of history, we find that there has been one constant means adopted by men for imparting zest and freedom to their mutual intercourse. The invention of strong drink offered a rough and ready solution to an age-long problem. The prime tendency of two male human atoms is not, like that of male and female, to enter into combination: a man's natural instinct is to pour out his soul to some apparently sympathetic woman; with another man he feels, in the depth of his being, something of the caution that he would have in pouring out the contents of his purse. His talk cannot flow quite freely, when he has to be on his constant guard against giving himself away. Nor is it only a question of the defensive; he has a natural instinct to talk not with, but at his neighbour, to regard talk not so much in the light of a co-operative work of art, as in that of a contest. He wishes to shine at his neighbour's expense; to score off him, to talk him down. When this competitive or defensive element is imparted to

the conversation, the result is equivalent to that of friction in machinery; and just as, when bearings get overheated, one has got to find a lubricant, so also in conversation, wherever two or three of the male sex are gathered together.

The precise purpose that is fulfilled by strong drink is to eliminate friction. It is perfectly true, what the teetotallers say, that it acts as a sort of poison: but that is just what it is meant to do, for it attacks the higher controlling centres; it paralyses the censorship that, in a long course of evolution, man has come to establish over his words. The watch upon his tongue is suspended; the door of his lips is left ajar; the words come crowding out, joyous and carefree.

Drink would appear to be almost as necessary an adjunct to masculine conversation, as betting is to horse-racing. What proportion of those crowds that frequent race meetings, would go for the simple pleasure of watching a race between thoroughbreds? Until they have imparted a factitious interest to the proceedings by identifying their fortunes with those of some particular horse, the turf has no compelling attraction. And so a very large proportion of men only begin to find joy in each others' conversation when 'Safety First' has ceased to be the instinctive law. Then comes the chance for the bond of sym-

pathy to be established, and for the whole company to be bound together in warm and vociferous unison.

For the whole world over, song and music have been the handmaids of Bacchus; added sometimes to the feast by professional musicians, as we know them to have been in Athens and Palestine, and as we can see for ourselves in the minstrels' galleries of Gothic and Renaissance banqueting halls: but most natural of all is it for the revellers themselves to overflow into song; to 'sneck up', as the immortal Sir Toby expressed it. The number of drinking songs and catches that have been provided for this purpose, in the English tongue alone, defies computation.

These songs, however gross and frivolous, have never entirely lost the sacramental significance that invested the cult of the vine in ancient Greece, and of whatever stimulants may have been in vogue among primitive peoples. The act of drinking together is a means of ecstasy and of communion; it offers a physical and temporary short cut to joys that are not otherwise attained without prolonged and self-sacrificing discipline:

*What are heaven's pleasures
That so very sweet are,
Singing from psalters
In long or short metre . . .*

*Wide is the difference
My own boasting bullies,
Here the round punch bowl
Heaped to the full is.
Then if some wise one
Thinks that up "yonder"
Is pleasant as we are,
Why—he's in a blunder!*

or, to sum up the drinker's faith in a line:

Punch is a remedy for every kind of evil.

A specious remedy, no doubt, that may end, as the next line admits, in 'driving you to the Devil'. For indeed mankind, from the most primitive times, has alternated between the worship and the fear of the bottle. Sometimes the fear has prevailed. Prohibition is no newfangled or civilized invention: to many primitive peoples strong drink is a strong demon, and accordingly taboo; and there is a disposition among the most civilized to look askance on short cuts and quick cure-alls. Not only did the Buddha and Mahomet set their faces against drink, as against sin; but—what is more remarkable—many even among the followers of Christ, a drinker, maker, and sanctifier of wine, have openly embraced principles that, logically applied, would have justified a police raid on the Last Supper.

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It is not a controversy in which we are concerned to take sides. Our present interest in drink is as a stimulant of conversation, and particularly of male conversation; for its use, except in homeopathic doses, to promote mixed conviviality, is too much against the grain of human nature to be more than exceptional. The inhibitions that clog the flow of exclusively male conversation, and which it is the province of stimulants to break down, do not operate, to anything like the same extent, when intercourse is mixed. The male tends as naturally to unite with the female, as he does to oppose his fellow male; and the result of breaking down inhibitions in mixed company is only too likely to stimulate that urge to union beyond the utmost limits of good fellowship. Bacchus is a friend to love, and a drunken man's impulse, when thrown together with an attractive woman, is to possess her; as those unfortunate civilians realize only too well who live on the path of invading armies. The retirement of the ladies, after the port has begun to go round, was originally for the purpose of getting them away from the men while the going was good.

Of course there are innumerable instances of the deliberate use of stimulants, often under the guise of religion, to eliminate, from a mixed company, the

last restraints of shame and decency, at the start of a sexual orgy. But that is an entirely different thing from what happens 'when good fellows get together', and drink themselves into a condition of voluble, or uproarious, good fellowship, ending up, in extreme cases, in the condition that undergraduates characterize as 'logged'.

And it is remarkable how widespread has been the need experienced by men of different times and lands to provide liquid stimulus for their conversation. It would be hard indeed to imagine a cheery company of abstainers, clinking teacups, and waxing ever more gloriously eloquent as their hearts warmed to one another round the festive urn—and that in spite of the fact that the excellent John Wesley actually went so far as to thunder against indulgence in the sinful stimulant called tea. There is indeed a strenuous and overwhelming heartiness peculiar to non-alcoholic symposia; but hardly of the kind that strikes fire from conversation. The unliquored male company would appear to be too much obsessed by the idea of 'safety first', to achieve positive brilliance.

In the exquisitely cultured Chinese aristocratic society of classical times, we find an almost exclusive reliance on male friendship as a basis for conversation; though not the sort of passionate friendship

that would have appealed to the Athenian. For the ease of his carnal affections, the Chinese gentleman had his womenfolk; spiritual intercourse was the province of his own sex. It was a spirit eminently rational. The Chinese poet, Mr Arthur Waley tells us, 'recommends himself not as a lover, but as a friend. He poses as a person of infinite leisure . . . free from worldly ambitions, the very incarnation, in fact, of rational good sense.' All the more surprising is it to be told that he would also desire to be thought of 'as a boon companion, a great drinker of wine, who will not disgrace a social gathering by quitting it sober'.¹

For it would seem to have stood to Chinese reason that wine was a necessary condition of masculine good fellowship, and therefore of good talk. This, indeed, would seem the almost universal verdict. Even the Mahomedans have never been able to honour their Prophet's veto with any consistency. 'The violation of the rule', says Professor Margoliouth, 'has been common during all periods of Islam, even some of the Prophet's companions having yielded to the Temptation. The Arabic language has as fine a collection of wine lays as the Greek once possessed. Probably one may say with truth that

¹ 170 *Chinese Poems* by Arthur Waley, p. 4.

intoxication has not often been a vice of the poorer Moslems, but rather of the wealthy and fashionable.'¹

Exactly. For it is among the wealthy, and presumably educated, Moslems that the need of loosening the tongue would have been most likely to be felt. Poverty drinks to forget; its inhibitions are few.

The Christian peoples of the West have, from their earliest beginnings, acted upon the assumption that if men are to converse freely, they must first drink well. The barbarians, who overthrew Rome, and the Vikings, who threatened to do the same for the civilization founded on its ruins, were mighty no less as drinkers than as warriors. In what way our ancestors were accustomed to settle even their most momentous affairs may be judged from the earliest set of ordinances that we possess for the good city of London, dating from the reign of Athelstan:

“That we gather to us once every month, if we can and have leisure, the “hynden men”, and those who direct the tithings, as well with bytt (or butt) filling as else it may concern us, and know what of our agreement has been executed: and let these twelve have their refection together, and feed themselves accord-

¹ *Mahomedanism*, p. 130.

ing as they deem themselves worthy, and deal the remains of the meat for the love of God.'¹

It is in such feastings and 'butt fillings' that we have the germ of the great medieval trade gilds. But it was not only among the laity that men sought for drink to quicken their intercourse. Even St Benedict, the creative genius who came to the rescue of an almost perishing civilization, with his order of working as well as praying devotees, was forced, to his great regret, to humour the wickedness of the times by conceding to each monk his daily half-pint. There were greater concessions allowed by the Church on festivals and saints' days; and for a priest or monk to get drunk at the behest of a bishop was only a matter for penance, if the bishop had been in the same state already when he gave the order.²

But are we to write of alcoholic conviviality as if it were a masculine monopoly? Champions of their sex will have no difficulty in citing instances of female topers galore. Now that records of episcopal visitations have lifted the lid from off life within the walls of medieval nunneries, we have learnt how common a thing it was for their inmates to slip out of gates to the nearest alehouse, which no doubt was well

¹ Stubbs's *Select Charters*, p. 67.

² E. Westermarck. *The Origin and Development of Morals*, II, 3.

enough typified by that described in *Piers Plowman*, where you might find, on the bench, passing round the cup, Cis the shoe-seller, Wat the warrener and his wife, dish-selling Rose, Clarice of Cock Lane, along with tinkers, ditchers, rat-catchers, and—we are forced to add—‘Sir Piers the priest’. And then—if song is anything to go by—there are the four drunken maidens from the Isle of Wight who pushed the jug about until, we are asked to believe, they had relieved it of forty quarts of Malaga!

We have no wish to deny honour where honour is due, but these instances are too sporadic to make it plausible to maintain that female tongues require to be loosened by wine, even when men are excluded from the company. Indeed, the common demand would appear to be less for an effective means of loosing than of binding that particular member in the female sex.

It is perhaps the fact that nature has cast her for the part of a stay-at-home, that has made woman a less clubbable creature than the hunter and ranger, man. The fellowship of the human pack, all howling in unison like wolves under a January moon, is not for her. We do not know whether there are female circles where ‘She’s a jolly good fellow’ is chorused, or, perhaps:

*Ye're a' blind drunk, lassies
Wha's fou now?*

but the effect, on the average observer, would be rather like that of baby talk among men. On the other hand, few men possess almost every woman's capacity for confidential intimacy with one or two of her own sex over the teacups, or whatever may have been their equivalent before tea was discovered.

No doubt wine, and its fellow stimulants, have their uses in speeding mixed conversation. But to qualify for mixed company strong drink, like the attendants of harems, must suffer loss of manhood, at any rate among people of breeding and education; for so long as the poor continue to be with us, there will be those of both sexes who will welcome any opportunity of boozing themselves into oblivion.

The use of wine as a stimulant of mixed conversation is a gentle and delicate art that fell into a long abeyance after the decline of ancient Egypt. There was opportunity in Imperial Rome, but the innate grossness of the Roman nature was a bar, and the male symposium had a way of developing into an orgy. It was only after the development of Christian chivalry, that it became possible to talk of the ideal knight as 'the meekest man and the gentlest that ever

ate in hall among ladies'. Ever since that day, in Western civilization, the presence of ladies has exercised at least a restraining influence on convivial grossness, until, in Victorian times, the mere presence of a woman on the throne was enough to put a stop to the Rabelaisian toasts that were still the fashion in male gatherings, and one of which had actually been fired off by her sailor uncle, William IV, after the departure of the ladies, at his coronation banquet.

CHAPTER XII

CLOACINA'S PART

WHICH brings us to another strange and im-
memorial accompaniment of exclusively male
intercourse, in the form of deliberate conversational
obscenity, or bawdry. The delights of the bottle are
sufficiently obvious, but those of insanitary or im-
moral verbiage are not quite so easy to explain.
And yet there would appear to have been few times
and places in which men, when they have got to-
gether, have not tended to lapse into these unsavoury
intimacies. That enormous realist, Sir Robert
Walpole, was only facing up frankly to improper
reality when he said that he always talked bawdry at
his own table, because this was a subject in which all
could join. We charitably presume that Sir Robert
meant—after the departure of the ladies, though
we cannot forget that his conversation was notorious-
ly broad, even with women.

Bawdry would appear to be a necessary safety-
valve, a sort of verbal saturnalia. The inhibitions of

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decency are after all artificial, and painfully acquired. The baby knows nothing of them till they are imposed as a taboo, under dire sanctions by the grown-ups; and henceforth decency lies on the soul with a weight heavy as frost, but, at best, only a light ground frost.

Its necessity is so obvious in mixed company that the taboo is usually fairly well observed. But the repression is felt, like the pressing down of a spring, and to remove it even for a moment is to satisfy an almost irresistible demand for freedom. That freedom is not necessarily for lasciviousness. The errand boy, who takes a piece of chalk and writes on the parapet of a railway arch the very word that his parents, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters have most sternly vetoed, may well be more free from sinful desires than Sir Galahad, who, if he did actually go about boasting that his heart was pure, was probably more tempted than most people by what lay behind the immaculate façade he presented to the world. Not the least sexual peccadillo has ever been caused by the reading of Rabelais; and in fact the particular kind of grossness that is associated with his name is more calculated to damp than to excite the passions of any normal Don Juan.

In modern times, at any rate, the most characteristic

male bawdry is something entirely apart from sensuality. It is an assertion of freedom; the deliberate and temporary overturning of accepted standards. In that monstrous and fantastic world of smoking-room mythology, everything is turned upside down. Bishops, as the recognized *ne plus ultra* of conventional respectability, taboos incarnate in gaiters, are involved in adventures as grossly improbable as they are grossly obscene; blushing brides astonish unsuspecting bridegrooms—preferably curates—by the cynical indelicacy of their repartees; sovereigns and potentates assemble from all parts of the world in solemn conclave to compare their respective experiences in abnormality.

Bawdry, like wine, is a breaker-down of the invisible barriers between man and man. As Sir Robert Walpole evidently divined, there is no such solvent of male differences. To talk politics or religion among people whose opinions in any way differ, and sometimes even among professors of the same orthodoxy, is asking for trouble. But the laughter that ripples round the circle, when the answer of the bathing attendant to the old lady is reported, has no malice in it; it is, if you like to put it that way, a communion of sinners; a democratic communion, since the fellowship of bawdry annihilates class distinctions. The Duke who nudges the commoner with an enquiry whether

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he has heard this one, is honouring him in the fullest sense as a man and a brother. He who forgives his enemy may do so with bitterness, and the desire to heap coals of fire upon his head; but he who caps Limericks with him has charity in his heart.

This Platonic quality by no means characterizes the exchange of salacious conversation between the sexes. That is too directly and obviously provocative to be anything else than a form of verbal exhibitionism. At best, it can only be added, with the most allusive delicacy, as flavouring to the conversation.

Moreover bawdry, like wine, is never quite the success in female society that it is in male. It is essentially a form of conviviality; and where men are convivial, women are intimate. A giggling confidence is an altogether different thing from what is almost a communal ritual. No woman, unless she were psychologically masculine, could appreciate the broad impersonality of the smoking-room; nor would any average woman accept uncritically the fantastic unreality of Cloacina's fairyland: it would outrage her practical good sense even more than her sense of propriety. 'Oh but', she would object, 'no Bishop ever would think of making a bet of that kind with his Dean,' or, 'As if he *would* have sent her a post card to thank her!'

Decency forbid that we should be suspected of an apology for bawdry! Let there be no mistake about our sentiments—any sort of impropriety is admittedly improper, and no proper person will allow that there can be any severer condemnation. But to condemn is not in our province; and no account of human conversation would be complete, if it were to ignore that important element of it that cannot, with impunity, be crystallized in print, and in consequence has produced a not inconsiderable body of unwritten literature, some of it brilliantly clever, passed from mouth to mouth, and suffering slow and culminative change in the process. You may, if you like, call it a disease; but we do not feel compelled to write of disease in a strain of righteous invective, still less to abstain from writing of it at all. The more detached our interest in the subject, the healthier we are likely to be.

The fact that both drink and bawdry have been found, throughout recorded time, to be almost necessary stimulants of masculine conversation, does not prove that they are good in themselves. It is possible at least, to infer that unless conversation is raised to the level of an art, it is likely to sink to one that is low, unintelligent, and unsatisfying. It is conceivable that means might be found of removing the obstacles

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to good fellowship without resort to such crude and imperfect expedients. The phrase 'drunken but not with wine', need not necessarily be employed in the disparaging sense of the Hebrew prophet. There is Baudelaire's: 'It is the hour to be drunken! Be drunken, if you would not be the martyred slaves of time; be drunken continually! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will.'¹

Or, we might add: 'Outrage the proprieties! Defy the conventions. With Rabelais, with Galileo, or with Shelley, as you will. Or even . . .'

¹ A. Symons' translation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WESTERN PRIMITIVES

THIS, then, is the conclusion to which we are driven: that it is only by bringing the women into it, on equal terms, that the best can be got out of conversation. That has been the task and the glory of our own Western civilization; since its Oriental rivals, for all their equal, or superior, spirituality, have put themselves out of the running by their incurable tendency to segregate the sexes.

Even in their native forests, the fair-haired barbarians who were destined to overthrow, and give new life, to Rome, were, on the testimony of Rome's greatest historian, accustomed to honour their women; and the Christian religion, which was Rome's gift to her conquerors, was in more ways than one calculated to reinforce this tendency. In Saxon England there were actually monasteries whose membership was recruited from both sexes, and which provided scope for such talents as those of the great Abbess Hilda, of Whitby. On the other hand, the

part of the Roman Empire which, from its capital at Byzantium, still maintained its Imperial continuity, turned its face deliberately to the East and the harem. The historian of conversation, therefore, when he comes to his Byzantine section, may content himself with:

‘There is no Byzantine conversation that deserves recording.’

It is different in the West. Here all the conditions were favourable from the first, except for the single fact that, outside the regular orders of the Church, life was for a long time too tempestuous and too savage to allow the development of so gentle an art. But in the long, bookless evenings in the feudal castle, with their fearful possibilities of boredom, relieved by an occasional wandering minstrel or story-teller, the good or amusing talker must have been worth his weight in gold. However, among the more than half-barbarous illiterates of the dark and twilight ages, there was little opportunity for any but the crudest of interchanges.

The awakening to better things came from a variety of causes, and was probably in no small measure due to quickening contact with the culture of Islam. It is in sunny Provence that we see the beginnings of an attempt, outside the bounds of the

Church, to make social intercourse a thing of deliberately contrived beauty. Fantastic enough were the courts of love and the highly artificial convention of romance that we associate with the name and song of the troubadours; but from these sprang the code of chivalrous courtesy that invests with such fragrant associations the word 'medieval'; though it was only when the Middle Age was entering on its final and almost decadent phase, that chivalry began to take on anything like the glamour that invests it in our modern imaginations.

The great advantage, from our point of view, of even this veneer of civilized manners, is that it provided a basis for conversation, by the unprecedentedly high respect it accorded to women. It is true that the homage still remained largely lip homage, and that up to the very end the bodies and souls of the highest ladies in the land were disposed of like chattels in wardship. But the lady had become, at least in romantic theory, less an equal than a superior, the object of the most extravagant worship. The troubadours, especially, had gone a long way towards discrediting the taboos that had kept her in what may have been a salutary, but was certainly not a conversational, subjection. We have such astonishing heresies as that of the absolutely free scope to be afforded to

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any sufficiently ardent passion. According to some codes of love, it was a positive sin to allow the marriage bond to inhibit a liaison, and hence are born such ideal creations as that of Sir Launcelot, the latest importation into the Arthur Saga, the pattern of knightly courtesy and the most irresistible of lovers. It was, as everyone knows, while they were reading the story of Launcelot and Guinivere, that Paolo, by kissing Francesca on the mouth, consigned both their souls to be tossed forever on the winds of Hell.

Chivalry was the rule of a club, and of a jealously exclusive club, of aristocrats; but it was probably only by fencing off such enclosures that the intensive cultivation of civilized intercourse was rendered possible. How much there was to be done may be gauged from such unimpeachable precepts, in manuals of polite behaviour, as

*If thou spit over the board, or else upon,
Thou shalt not be held a courteous man,*

Thereon shalt not thy nose wipe. . . .

For all that it was no small achievement to have set up a standard of formal courtesy, particularly towards women, such as had not been approached in the palmiest days of the classical world. For whether

or not we are to accept the dictum of that great fourteenth-century scholar, William of Wykeham, that manners makyth man, it is at least beyond dispute that manners makyth conversation.

Among the first of English printed books is Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, an extraordinary attempt to adapt the old savage legends to the forms of the new culture, and including such incidents as that of King Arthur's attempt to burn his wife alive, and of her lover and rescuer Sir Launcelot's unfortunate mistake, in cutting down a couple of innocent spectators of the entertainment who turned out to be his own relatives.

But the real importance of the book 'unto all noble princes, lords, or ladies, gentlemen or gentle-women', is sufficiently indicated in the preface addressed to them by Caxton himself, the father of the English printed word:

'Herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue and sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renown.'

In fact this, the story book that all loved, displayed a pattern of civilized intercourse in which gentleness and courtesy were the ruling principles. The dought-

iest warrior, when he came into hall or bower, was expected to put off his fierceness and clothe himself at least in the semblance of humility. The grossness of the earlier feudalism, in which the minstrel, as a matter of routine, would implore the tipsy barons for the love of God to listen and cease their quarrels, was no longer tolerated; at last the conditions were created in which men and women might not only join freely in conversation, but even make an art of it.

That art was no doubt in its crude infancy, even in the pages of Malory. These knights and ladies were as yet lacking in the intellectual qualities that are the *sine qua non* of the finished conversationalist; but even these may be detected in embryo. There is a strangely modern tinge in a fragment of conversation between that rather cynical humorist, Sir Dinadan, and La Beale Isoud, or Iseult.

‘What do ye in this country?’ is her first question, and on being told that he is seeking Sir Tristram, the good knight, she replies that she is not ware of him.

‘Madam’, pursues Dinadan, evidently looking for an opening, ‘I marvel of Sir Tristram and more other lovers, what aileth them to be so mad and sotted upon women.’

‘Why,’ returns Isoud, accepting the gambit, ‘are

ye a knight and be no lover? It is shame to you: wherefore ye may not be called a good knight, but if ye make quarrel for a lady.'

'God defend me,' says Dinadan, a very Cervantes or Shaw in his realism, 'for the joy of love is too short, and the sorrow thereof, and what cometh thereof, dureth over long.'

'Ah', says Isoud, not at all daunted, 'say ye not so, for here fast by was the good knight Sir Bleoberis that fought with three knights at once for a damsels sake, and he won her afore the King of Northumberland.'

Sir Dinadan, perhaps because he is at a loss for any more effective repartee, merely remarks that he does know Bleoberis to be a good and noble knight; whereupon Isoud, clinching it, demands whether Dinadan will fight for her love, as befits a Knight of Arthur's, against three knights who have done her great wrong.

But Dinadan, not to be cornered, has the last, and unanswerable, word, with:

'I shall say you, ye be as fair a lady as ever I saw any and much fairer than my lady Queen Guinivere, but wit ye well at one word, I will not fight for you with three knights, Jesu defend me.'

'Then', says Malory, 'Isoud laughed, and had good game at him.'

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Here we have the unmistakable beginnings of conversation, made for its own sake as one of the fine arts. The witty knight and the Irish princess are expert fencers, engaging in a friendly bout, and each delightedly aware of the other's skill. They are artists, in co-operation, fashioning a little piece of talk as exquisite, in its way, as the illuminated page of a manuscript.

CHAPTER XIV

RENAISSANCE

THE joyous awakening to the splendour and beauty of mundane life, that we call the Italian Renaissance, may claim, as not the least of its achievements, to have given birth to an art of conversation fit to be compared with those other arts, of form and sound and literature, whose products are that age's imperishable glory. We can see and hear and read for ourselves such masterpieces as those of Michelangelo, and Palestrina, and Tasso; but we can never do more than infer, by the most fragmentary indications, what passed from lip to lip at the Round Table of Lorenzo the Magnificent's Platonic Academy, or at the social circles presided over by Isabella d'Este, or the Duchess of Urbino, or that other much maligned and much loved Duchess, who is known to melodrama by her maiden name of Lucrezia Borgia.

And yet to those fortunate enough to be born in that time and land and class, conversation must have seemed the queen of all the arts, in its capacity of

ministering to happiness; for happiness was pursued with a burning, an almost agonizing ardour. Life was so short and perilous and deliciously sweet; there was such over-abundance of vital energy striving for any outlet; there was so little of the old faith in anything beyond! In this present, so terribly brief, between the nothingness of the past and the annihilation, or worse, of the future, every moment had to be packed with the utmost attainable intensity of enjoyment. As Lorenzo himself cries out in song—I trust not too freely rendered:

*Oh how beautiful our springtide,
That is always, always fleeing!
Who would now be glad, now let him!
In to-morrow—there's no being.*

And—certainly to the Italian mind—there was no source of daily happiness more prolific than that derived from the contact of mind and mind in talk. It is no wonder that the creative genius of the age should have exploited it, after its manner, artistically; and that an art of conversation should have been forced, in that hothouse atmosphere, to a sudden and splendid maturity.

Now, at last, woman comes fairly into her own, not only as equal, but as leader and shaper of con-

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versational interplay. Those wonderful Renaissance women, with every accomplishment at their fingertips; eloquent, it might be, in a diversity of tongues, living and dead; sometimes deeply versed in philosophy; always past mistresses of the art of life! We have only to mention such names as those of the noble and gifted sisters, Isabella and Beatrice d'Este; of Michelangelo's Vittoria Colonna; of Elizabeth Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino, and her confidant, the Lady Emilia Pia; of Tullia d'Aragona, most brilliant of many talented courtesans; of the poetess, Veronica Gambara; and then, as the spirit of the Renaissance spreads its inspiration beyond the Alps, of Margaret of Navarre and the *Heptameron*; until at last it comes to England and is manifest in Lady Jane Grey and Queen Elizabeth.

The Renaissance did not yield this enfranchisement to women without a struggle. Dominated as it was, to the pitch of pedantry, with the idea of reproducing, not only the spirit, but the form, of classical antiquity, it was only natural that it should have harked back to the Platonic ideal of passionate communion between men. The two great Medici, Cosimo and Lorenzo, did their best to revive the Platonic Academy and the Platonic symposia in the delightful surroundings of their country residence at Careggi; but the

idea struck no roots, and the experiment never got beyond the stage of self-conscious make-believe. The tendency to make social intercourse bisexual was too strong, and too thoroughly in harmony with the Western genius, to be resisted.

We have no more authentic record of the talk of this time than of most others; but we do know the high estimation in which this art of making it was held and the high seriousness with which it was practised. Every variety of experiment was tried; story-telling was part of every gentleman and lady's social equipment; intellectual games were continually being devised to sharpen the wits of the company; even the various forms of permissible humour were minutely studied.

There is no more revealing account of Renaissance society, than that given by Baldassare Castiglione of the little court of Urbino; where life, one imagines, must have been about as delightful as, in the present state of human nature, one can well conceive. Here, in an atmosphere of unruffled urbanity, we find seriousness exquisitely blended with badinage; and we can well imagine how the debate on the never-exhausted topic of love is prolonged, until at last it occurs to someone to suggest an adjournment until the morrow:

“Nay, to-night,” quoth the Lord Caesar Gonzaga.

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“And how can it be to-night?” quoth the Duchess.

“The Lord Caesar answered: “Because it is day already,” and showed her the light that began to enter in at the clefts of the windows.’

‘Then’, Castiglione tells us, ‘every man rose to his feet with much wonder, because they had not thought that the reasonings had lasted longer than their accustomed wont, saving only that they were begun much later, and with their pleasantness had deceived so the Lords’ minds, that they wist not of the going away of the hours. And not one of them felt any heaviness of sleep in his eyes, the which often happeneth when a man is up after his accustomed hour to go to bed.

‘When the windows then were opened on the side of the palace that hath his prospect towards the high side of Mount Catri, they saw already in the East a fair morning like the colour of roses, and all stars voided, save only the sweet Governess of Heaven, Venus, which keepeth the bounds of the night and day, from which appeared to blow a sweet blast, that filling the air with a biting cold, began to quicken the tunable notes of the pretty birds, among the bustling woods of the hills at hand.

‘Whereupon they all taking their leave with reverence of the Duchess, departed to their lodgings

without torch, the light of the day sufficing.'

Not, however, before the Lady Emilia Pia, in whom some have seen the original of Shakespeare's Beatrice—though the gentle Emilia would never have expanded to Beatrice's broadness of humour—has had a final thrust at her official Benedick, the young Lord, Gaspar Pallavicin. Next time he starts libelling her sex, she stipulates that he shall find surety for standing to trial, 'for', says she, 'I reckon him a wavering starter'.

What a contrast is this scene to that which concludes Plato's ideal banquet, in which the dawn breaks upon the whole company, with the solitary exception of Socrates, either dead drunk on their couches, or just beginning to recover sufficiently to drag themselves home!

The art of conversation spread Northward with the Renaissance. The discovery of the uses and delights of the spoken word had an effect positively intoxicating, on minds less steeped in the tradition of culture than those of Dante's countrymen. Among the Elizabethans, talk became a game as fantastic as it was fascinating. Euphuism, it was called; and it consisted of a wild, competitive luxuriance of imagery, a capping of verbal conceits, the more elaborately artificial the better. The thing developed into what

we should now call a society craze; every young lady who wanted to be abreast of the times, or to attract the attentions of eligible youth, must be mistress of an inexhaustible fund of repartee, not infrequently taking the form of excruciating puns, which apparently were not considered out of taste even on the most tragic occasions. The most devout Shakespearians have found it a little hard to understand how it is that Juliet can react to what she believes to be the report of Romeo's death, by seeing how many meanings she can extract from the sound of I.

To Shakespeare himself, however, the idea of Euphuism, having become a second language capable of surviving the direst stress, was evidently not inconceivable. Through his earlier plays, Euphuism runs riot. From our standpoint, one of them, seldom acted and not too often read, is of extreme interest—that is *Love's Labour's Lost*. Here we have the attempt of a King and his leading courtiers to put back the clock and, in the name of culture, to constitute themselves, by oath, a closed society from which women are barred. We see how the Princess of France, with three intensely euphuistic ladies, demonstrates the complete unworkability of such a scheme; and triumphantly vindicates that principle of mixed

society out of which the art of conversation is born.

It mattered little what eccentricities marked its first, experimental stage: the fashion of Euphuism was already going out of date when Elizabeth, one of its most assiduous devotees, had entered upon the last decade of her reign. But the zest for conversation remained; such a book as that of Castiglione, done by Sir Thomas Hoby into an English intensely alive, created in many an Elizabethan mansion the desire to emulate the amenities of those Italian courts in which life had been so gloriously worth living. We can see something of that sheer delight in brilliant talk, in the verbal sparring of Benedick and Beatrice, which is Shakespeare's attempt to show that we can do these things as well on the English stage as in the palace halls of Urbino. There is one sense in which he might have claimed to have done them even better; for hardly, even in Italy, do we meet with such exuberant fertility of conversational invention. Nor need we put this down almost and altogether to the individual genius of the man Shakespeare; we find just the same state of things depicted two centuries before his time by Chaucer, in the talk of the Canterbury pilgrims, set down with a simple directness that is the supreme triumph of art. Artists of conversation this typical company, drawn from every

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class of the community, did not aspire to be; but from the brief prologues that are interspersed with the Tales, we gather that they were as much in their element in talking as in story-telling; fluent, resourceful, and witty, even if, with one or two exceptions, they lacked the polite urbanity that eliminates friction, and were addicted to that habit of verbal bludgeoning that is the besetting sin of the English talker.

*God save you all, except this cursed frere! . . .
Thy draftie song is not worth . . .*

being not unrepresentative specimens of their mostly good-humoured chaff.

We find just the same sort of quarter-staff work in the interchanges of Benedick and Beatrice, that delightful couple, who are certainly in love with each other from the beginning, and show it by going out of their way to say all the rude things they can think of to each other, on every possible occasion.

‘I had rather’, says Beatrice, ‘hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me.’

‘God keep your ladyship still in that mind,’ puts in the irrepressible Benedick, ‘so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face.’

To which Beatrice counters, in the best private-school style:

'Scratching could not make it worse, an 'twere such a face as yours.'

Decidedly more witty, but no more urbane, is Beatrice's instant retort to Don Pedro who, on Benedick's leaving the room saying he cannot endure my Lady Tongue, remarks that she has put him down:

'So I would not he should do to me, my lord, lest I should prove the mother of fools.'

Which was exactly the sort of thing that Elizabeth herself would have enjoyed saying.

All of which shows what an infinity of polishing was yet required by the crude material of English conversation, before it could become the finished product of art. And yet of what unsurpassed richness is this still undisciplined and imperfectly civilized verbiage of Shakespeare's contemporaries; the more so since the language itself was in a state of unsettlement and transition that allowed of every sort of liberty and experiment!

CHAPTER XV

THE TECHNIQUE OF THE 'SALON'

IT was not in English that the art of conversation was destined to be brought nearest to formal perfection. This was reserved for the French genius, thanks largely to the creative vision of that supremely representative French aristocrat, Cardinal Richelieu, who devoted scarcely less attention to organizing culture than to organizing government. It was under his auspices that the French Academy was formed; and during his rule that the first of the great *salons* came into being, in the house of the Marquise de Rambouillet.

It was in the *salon* that woman, far from being content with mere equality, achieved an absolute and acknowledged supremacy. Never before had feminine taste and influence counted for so much. Not even philosophy and science could thrive without accommodating themselves to feminine requirements; still less the arts, and least of all woman's especial province

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of conversation. The *salon*, in talk, supplied the place of the studio and laboratory.

Some of us have read, with a not unjustifiable pride, how the 'Sun King', Louis XIV, came within measurable distance of imposing French sway on Christendom, and how, after long, wearisome bloodshed, that attempt was foiled; but if we confine our vision to the realm of the spirit, we shall be not far out in saying that the France of Louis XIV not only attempted, but achieved, the conquest of the West.

No written historical record has half the significance of the vast and eloquent witness in stone, the palace that this Louis built at Versailles to house not only the royalty, but the whole higher nobility of France, and that now, in its state of tenantless publicity, seems the very sarcophagus of a civilization. It was from this centre that not only did the French monarchy control its once turbulent realm, as the brain controls the body, but that, by a sort of telepathy, it succeeded in radiating its ideas and ideals far beyond its bodily limits. It was nothing that the French armies could be held, could be defeated; the English general who received the sword of a Maréchal de France did so beneath the portentous wig, and with the even more portentous formality, of the Versailles convention. Poets who hymned his triumph

sought nothing better than to conform to the most approved French models. The Princes of Germany might have good reason for banding together against the tyrant who so cruelly ravaged German soil, but every one of these princes sought, in his clumsy, Teutonic way, to turn his own court into a miniature Versailles, and himself into as colourable an imitation as possible of the Grand Monarque. Even the Great Frederick, who sealed the doom of that monarchy and civilization by hunting its armies like hares, was the most slavish of all their spiritual disciples, and racked his brains hardly so much with strategical problems, as with the task of turning out reams of atrocious French verse, for the by no means disinterested appreciation of Voltaire.

Over the Grand Mogul's divan at Delhi is inscribed: 'Is there a Paradise on Earth? It is here! It is here! It is here!' Something very similar might have been engraved over the portals of Versailles, and there would have been few to dissent from the conclusion. A pattern of civilized existence had been set up for all those to copy, whose existence counted for anything. For like immortality in ancient Egypt, the perfect way of life was the monopoly of an exclusive and privileged caste: the idea of Christianity, that all souls are equal before God, was funda-

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mentally repugnant to the spirit of an age, that displayed its polite irony in nothing so much as by retaining the forms of a faith the antithesis of its own.

Never was there such superb self-assurance as inspired this gospel of courtly paganism, before the acid of its own critical spirit had begun to loosen its foundations. As befitted the French mind, it was a very definite gospel, definite most of all in its limitations. There was no room in it for mystery; the emotions, if they were allowed to exist at all, must be as neatly formalized as the clipped yew hedges of its gardens. Its creed was based upon the belief that human nature in the raw was something that civilized gentlefolk should be ashamed to own, or at any rate to display; and that life for them was to be rationalized and civilized out of all resemblance to its barbarous original. From *levée* to *couchée*, every word, every movement, was to be exactly regulated according to a deliberately contrived plan, fixed upon by infallible authority as that of the ideal, leisured existence, for those whose grosser needs were assumed to be provided for by a genteel economics.

The civilized lady or gentleman is therefore one who has attained that peace which, far from passing all understanding, is perfectly self-conscious and self-

contained. Such a being is never ruffled, never visibly exalted or depressed, in any situation whatever. The husband who discovers his wife in the embraces of a lover merely remarks how unfortunate it might have been if anybody else had been witness of the indiscretion; a dying author intimates to the bystanders that he experiences a certain difficulty in existing.

To anyone familiar with modern psychology, the result of such an experiment in living might have been predicted; human nature was not conquered, but merely driven below, and not very far below, the surface, to burst out at intervals with volcanic force. We have only to read the numerous memoirs of that time, to realize what savages, beneath their veneer of civilization, these fine people were. That urbanity of deportment was by no means reflected in the soul; the most petty intrigues, scandal, malice, backbiting, not infrequently passing into sharp practice, and actual crime—these things were as characteristic of the epoch as its fine manners: the gentle art of poisoning was among those that proliferated under the sun rays of Louis XIV; a madman who had attempted the life of his successor provided an afternoon's entertainment for the whole court, not excepting the ladies, by expiring after the most elaborate programme of tortures that could possibly be devised;

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while to descend from the devilish to the dirty, even Dr Johnson, no paragon of refinement himself, notes that 'the French are an indelicate people; they will spit upon any place. At Madame —'s a literary lady of rank, the footman took the sugar in his fingers, and threw it into my coffee . . . the same lady must needs take tea *à l'Anglaise*. The spout of the teapot did not pour freely; she bade the footman blow into it . . .' That is a sample of petty manners not so long before the Revolution—but as a sidelight on the grand manners of the grandest period, we may take the Duc de St Simon's account of how the heir to the throne, and others, broke into the apartments of the old Princess de Harcourt, one winter night, and, in spite of her screams for mercy, pelted her with snowballs till her bed was swimming—an outrage for which she could obtain not the least redress, even from the King himself.

When, therefore, we speak of the art of conversation as having attained formal perfection under the auspices of the old régime, we must not be understood to imply a perfection of anything more, or deeper, than the surface. If we compare the talk of the *salons* with that of Christ or Socrates, it is as if we were exhibiting a jewelled snuff-box beside the façade of Rheims, or the Parthenon frieze. But we must

remember that conversation, more than any other art, demands an exquisiteness of style in those who are to practise it successfully; or, if one may take a mechanical analogy, the first thing needful is to eliminate friction. To write or paint or compose in a passion is bad enough; but here the passion is at any rate a passion of one, and does not clash with others; whereas talk is the result of co-operation, a spontaneous unison of independent wills. Once let these wills be loosed in active opposition to one another, and harmony is destroyed; it is as if the players in a symphony were each engaged in an effort to dominate or drown the rest of the orchestra.

The supremely talented conductresses, who presided in their *salons* over the conversational symphonies of the *ancien régime*, were adepts in creating this atmosphere of sympathetic goodwill, in whose absence one may look to hear nothing but discords. They were none of them women of profound scholarship, nor have they left any writings, except their correspondence, by which they are likely to be remembered; few of them were of outstanding beauty. The whole force and charm of their personalities was specialized to the one end of organizing, and stimulating, and inspiring talk; they had no object in life but to keep up this game of conversa-

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tion for as long as they could get anybody to play it. It was talk for talk's sake; they had no ulterior, they could conceive of no nobler end; but with such concentrated brilliance did they devote themselves to their limited objective, that they talked themselves into a not unimportant place in the history of civilization.

The golden age of the *salon* was the eighteenth century. It was then that an intellectual seasoning was added to the talk by the advent of the so-called *philosophes*, men, mostly of bourgeois extraction, who aspired to usher in what Burke, in no friendly spirit, was afterwards to characterize as a new conquering empire of light and reason. In them, the opposition to all established faiths and sanctities became as open as it dared to be under that tyranny of orthodox repression; but no repression could prevail against the spirit engendered by the talk of the *salons*. For talk thrives on what is new and piquant, and the spirit of the *philosophes* was like a current of fresh air stirring an exhausted atmosphere: their irreverences were deliciously stimulating; their ideas of science and liberty were as delightful to play with as new toys. Only one commandment did the *salons* impose upon these new intellectual lights—they must burn with a perpetual brilliance; godless they might be,

but never dull. This feminine imperative imparts a distinctive tone to the philosophy of the Enlightenment; at all costs it must be clear and lively and sufficiently stimulating to command the interest of that extremely intelligent, but by no means academic, world. Never would the *salons* have tolerated such long-winded and long-worded portentousness as that by which German Herr Professors of the following age won a reputation for philosophic depth, on much the same principle as Dartmoor pools: of which you cannot see the bottom, except in seasons of exceptional sunshine, acquire the local reputation of being bottomless.

The *salon* was thus the means by which the civilization of Versailles accomplished its own eventual downfall. The forces of authority were completely powerless to silence the voice of criticism; they might order dangerous literature, when they were capable of detecting its sting, to be burnt by the common hangman, but what booted that, when the *élite* of the class they were supposed to represent was in league with the enemy; when more subversive propaganda than anything that got into print was being disseminated by word of mouth; when the master iconoclasts were lionized and bidden to roar again? The *salon* was the mother of the guillotine.

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That the civilization of Versailles should thus have accomplished its destiny by undermining its own foundations, is perhaps not the least of its claims to greatness. There was too much that was unsound beneath the surface to make the perpetuation of the surface itself a practicable, still less a desirable, ideal. It was enough that it should have been demonstrated, for all time, how exquisite a charm could be imparted to existence by the discipline of taste and manners, and, in particular, how inexhaustible a source of delight is at the command of any educated society that understands how to use aright the faculty of speech. Talkers of all succeeding ages will have the achievement of the *salons* before them, and their standards to recover.

There were, of course, countless *salons* of varying degrees of excellence: it was, in fact, the ambition of every lady of fashion to preside over her own little coterie.

But it is with the few examples of outstanding and positive genius that we are chiefly concerned; those, for instance, of Mme du Deffand, Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, Mme Geoffrin, Mme de Tencin, and Mme d'Épinay. These very different women had one faculty in common; they cultivated, with unwearyed study and perseverance, the art of drawing

out into talk the brightest potentialities of those whom they had gathered into their circle. Their powers in this direction, when exercised upon the most unpromising subjects, could produce results little short of miraculous. It is recounted of Mme de Geoffrin, how even she was on the point of yielding to despair at the prospect of an evening with the Abbé St Pierre, who, like Goldsmith, though a writer of admirable prose, was a proser of another kind in his talk; but her courage was equal to the occasion—she put forth all her powers, and before she had finished with him, the good Abbé found himself positively scintillating. When, on his taking his leave, she was moved to congratulate him, with reason, on his brilliant conversation, 'Madame', was his reply, 'I am but an instrument on which you have played well.'

There were many styles of such virtuosity. There was the pure classical of the old school, as represented by the blind Mme du Deffand and her set of dignified survivals from the Regency of her former lover, the Duc d'Orleans. So fastidious were this lady's standards of critical taste, that few persons or writings were capable of satisfying them. Sentiment she had none, at least in public, though her repressed feelings found vent, without satisfaction, in an elderly passion for—of all people—Horace Walpole, whose light

nature was incapable of reciprocating or understanding deep feeling. It was her compensation for physical blindness, to survey everything that was brought to her notice with a mind's eye of uncanny penetration, and to comment on it with a faintly amused superiority. A famous example of her technique is her reply to a too pious dignitary of the Church, who was expatiating on the miracle of St Denis having carried his own head for no less than six miles:

'Ah monsieur', she said, 'in such a situation it is only the first step that matters'—*'ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.'*

Thoroughly in keeping is the complaint of another of her set, the Maréchale de Luxembourg, on glancing at the Bible, that it was a pity the Holy Spirit had so little taste: *'Quel ton! Quel effroyable ton!'*

It is no wonder that the old, Mephistophelian Mme du Deffand should have found it impossible to remain on speaking terms with her niece and protégée, Julie de Lespinasse, a consumptive creature of governess-like appearance, without wealth, or rank, or any other advantage, except a warm heart, a perpetually smiling face, and a genius for sympathy. And yet, such a fascination did she exercise over all those with whom she was brought into contact, that when Mme du Deffand, in furious jealousy that sorted ill

with her pose of Olympian detachment, drove her out of the house and made it plain that any communication with the 'traitress' would be resented as a mortal affront, the 'philosophic' intelligentsia deserted in a body to the new *salon* that Julie's exiguous resources, supplemented by charitable contribution, enabled her to maintain.

Then there is the Mme de Geoffrin whom we have already mentioned, a singularly lovable *bourgeoise* with a fund of homely good sense, whose specific talent consisted in mothering her friends, or perhaps we might say, constituting herself, in the best sense, a universal aunt. It is characteristic of the feeling she inspired that, when Stanislas Poniatowski ascended the rickety throne of Poland, he should have written to her: 'I am a king, mamma. Don't scold me!' Or as Horace Walpole wrote of her to his friend, Lady Hervey: 'I make her both my confessor and director, and begin to think I shall be a reasonable creature at last, which I had never intended to be. The next time I see her, I believe I shall say: "Oh common sense, sit down: I have been thinking so and so; is it not absurd?" for t'other sense and wisdom, I never liked them; I shall now hate them for her sake. If it was worth her while, I assure your Ladyship she might govern me like a child.'

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It was she who coined the phrase, the most beautiful that has come to us out of the *salons*:

'Never let the grass grow upon the path of friendship.'

As the eighteenth century declined from its meridian, the classic astringency of taste, that had dominated the *salons* was imperceptibly relaxed; a new note of tenderness and even passion was audible: the romantic spirit was astir, that had no part in the old régime. It may have been some such intuition that explains the extraordinary venom with which Mme du Deffand prosecuted her quarrel with poor Julie de Lespinasse—the girl was a traitress in a deeper than a merely personal sense. One of the later goddesses of the *salon*, Mme d'Épinay, extended her kindly patronage to an uncouth, egotistical creature of a genius very different from that of the genteel rationalists of the Enlightenment—a certain Jean Jacques Rousseau. As it proved, she might as well have clasped a serpent to her bosom. But this serpent was capable of more than the biting of every hand that fed him; like the ancient worm of Norse legend, he had poison enough in his jaws to swallow up a whole world—that world of politeness and reason of which the *salon* was the microcosm. The individual was knocking at the door, the naked soul, classless and undisciplined, clamant in

self-assertion. To-day it was the noble savage; to-morrow it would be the noble lack-breeches roaring: 'The aristocrats to the guillotine!' Then would come a new fashion of light and leading, that would anathemize the old taste and sense, as chains by which the free spirit of man was everywhere bound.

For the spirit of the *salon* was one of deliberately accepted limitations; its self-imposed discipline was as severe as that of any monastic order. There was no place or tolerance in it for cut-throat competition, or the survival of the fittest; reach that sought to exceed the grasp was as much out of place there as at the dinner table; the road of excess was marked on its maps as leading direct to Coventry. The code of polite manners, the requirements of *goût* and *ton*, of good taste and good tone, extracted the strictest subordination of the individual genius to the common weal; while good sense demanded that every word—and we had almost said every thought—should be controlled and foreseen, according to standards accepted by all, as best adapted to promote a common purpose of rational enjoyment. Egoism, eccentricity, enthusiasm—these were part of the old Adam that had to be put off: the new man and woman of civilization must be born, perfect in dress and deportment, into a heaven where there is always

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light, but never glare; always the coolness of good sense, but never the heat of passion; and if none but the elect should be predestinate to its amenities, that is no more than the strictest theologians have taught us to expect of Heaven.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ART OF DR JOHNSON

THE one serious rival—increasingly serious as the century progressed—to the French spirit was that of England. Indeed, there was one time—and that when the two nations were engaged in deadly combat all over the world—when a perfect craze of Anglomania captured the French upper class; the English system of government, the English novel, English science and philosophy, even English dress, were eagerly copied. But that in taste and tone the French genius reigned supreme it occurred to no Frenchman, and few Englishmen, to doubt.

Nevertheless England may claim to have furnished the age with its greatest talker in Dr Samuel Johnson, a case of sheer conversational genius asserting itself irresistibly, in spite of all handicaps. For when we write him down the greatest of talkers, it is in spite of limitations, which, in all conscience, were grave enough to have disqualified any other mortal from such a title. His conversational manners were of a

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sort that would have horrified the *habitués* of any *salon*. '*Quel ton, quel effroyable ton!*' would certainly have been the comment of the Maréchale de Luxembourg, or any one of that set, if they could have heard him puffing and thundering his dogmatic disposal, not only of every question, but, on due occasion, of the questioner into the bargain.

That the Doctor's manners were not incapable of lapsing into the outrageous, is only too true; but it is a truth that can be viewed in a distorted perspective. The notion, propagated by innumerable literary caricaturists, of him as an overbearing bully, a conversational egotist habitually trampling or shouting down opposition, is not only false, but manifestly absurd. That such a person could be tolerated in any company whatever, is contrary to what we know of human nature; that he should have been not only tolerated, but loved, deferred to, idolized, by the robust intelligentsia of eighteenth-century London, is wildly inconceivable. Those who read through their Boswell, and not merely the spiciest extracts, chosen on the principle of those journalese chroniclers whose record of Parliament is one of 'scenes in the House', will realize how comparatively few such outbursts actually were; how palpably the effect of a sick man's morbid irritability; how soon over, how readily

forgiven. It must have been worth while incurring the full blast of the thunderbolt, to have had the solace as such balm as only Johnson knew how to apply.

There was one occasion when Goldsmith, who had irritated him beyond all bearing, and finally detonated an explosion, was—so Boswell informs us—sitting in the Club silently brooding over Johnson's reprimand:

'Johnson perceived this, and said aside to some of us: "I'll make Goldsmith forgive me"; and then called to him in a loud voice: "Dr Goldsmith, something passed to-day when you and I dined; I ask your pardon." Goldsmith answered placidly: "It must be much from you, sir, that I take it ill." And so the difference was over, and they were on as easy terms as ever, and Goldsmith rattled away as usual.'

The failure of Queen Anne to cure the infant Samuel of King's evil no doubt resulted in an occasional failure of the elderly Johnson to exercise that perfect self-control that is the foundation of good manners; but it must not be forgotten that he had a way of retrieving his failures by such strokes of conciliatory genius, as not only rejoined but actually strengthened the bonds of friendship. And we must remember—what is always necessary in reading about

talk—that the cold print is apt to convey a very false impression of what actually passed. Time and again, in reading of Johnson's more aggressive sallies, one can see that the old fellow was holding forth, not exactly with his tongue in his cheek—that would be too bald a way of putting it—but perhaps with a glance out of the corner of his eye to see that the performance was being appreciated. To the very depths of his being, he was a humorist, and fully capable of taking a spectacular delight in his own performances.

Watch him, for instance, with his eyes sparkling benignantly at some admirable sentiment of the Quakeress, Mrs Knowles, about the love of Christ for St John, and then, without the least warning—this was in the year after Saratoga—bursting out with: 'I am willing to love all mankind, *except an American*,' and then, stoking himself up to boiling point, calling them 'rascals, robbers, and pirates', and exclaiming that he would burn and destroy them. It was in vain that Anna Seward, the Swan of Lichfield, interposed with what was probably the most penetrating observation of her placid career: 'Sir, this is an instance that we are always most violent against those we have injured—' the Doctor was fairly off, and opposition only stimulated him. 'He roared out', says

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Boswell, 'another tremendous volley, which one might fancy could be heard across the Atlantic'—and then, by degrees, a now highly scandalized, but not disagreeably thrilled Boswell, having made careful note of this excellent biographical copy, succeeded in diverting the great man's attention to other topics.

Now can anybody reading this—except, as Johnson might perhaps have suggested, a countryman of Boswell's—doubt that not only was the sage thoroughly enjoying himself by his little diversion, but that he was conscious, or at least sub-conscious, of contributing to everybody else's enjoyment? It was as if he had said to himself: 'This edifying stuff is getting a bore, though one oughtn't to think so, so —here goes!' It would certainly be an unusual American who would allow his leg to be pulled to the extent of taking such extravagance seriously; and it is significant that, when the talk was diverted, it was to the writings of a New England divine, whom Johnson treated with the gravest respect, though dissenting from his conclusions.

We are allowing our own legs to be pulled, when we abstract the words of Johnson from the context in which they were spoken—if they ever were spoken in that exact form—and judging them *au pied de la lettre*. If we could only have seen him, when

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somebody gave him an obvious opening, 'rolling', as Boswell once observed him, 'with joy at the thought that beamed in his eye', we should be less inclined to think of him as brutal or censorious, than as a great high-spirited schoolboy, ragging with his classmates in the playground. There was nobody ever less capable of malice aforethought or deliberate cruelty: the master passion of his nature would seem to have been a craving for affection; nor could all his outbursts prevent him from being a man greatly, and not far short of universally, beloved, one the transparent goodness of whose own heart conquered all others. He had no aptitude in Whistler's ungentle art of making enemies; but in the art of making and keeping friends, there indeed he was an adept.

And let it not be forgotten that no man was ever a greater stickler for manners than he, or capable of more magnificent politeness. His famous letter snubbing Lord Chesterfield is a masterpiece in the grand style of formal courtesy, nor was compliment ever more gracefully turned than his apology to Mrs Siddons, who, calling on him one day, found no chair for her in the room:

'Madam, you who so often occasion a want of seats to other people, will the more readily excuse the want of one yourself.'

One asks what politest courtier of Versailles would ever have dreamed of such delicacy of sentiment, as that which impelled Johnson to turn out himself in order to buy oysters for his cat, Hodge, lest by wounding the *amour-propre* of his servants, he should cause them to harbour a grudge against the creature.

Paradoxically enough, such a stickler for manners was Johnson, that the most unmannerly of his recorded outbursts were against what he resented as bad manners in other people.

‘I will not be put to the question. Don’t you consider, sir, that these are not the manners of a gentleman?’ or again:

‘Sir, I could never be diverted with incivility (poor Boswell had happened to ride on a little ahead). Doing such a thing makes one lose confidence in him who has done it, as one cannot tell what he will do next’;

or, when Boswell had said that he would like to see Johnson and Mrs Macaulay, a cloud gathers on Johnson’s brow, and then comes the thunder:

‘No, sir, you would not see us quarrel to make you sport. Don’t you know that it is very uncivil to *pit* two people against each other?’

Though, having thus delivered himself, he at once relents, so far as to add:

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'I do not say you should be hanged or drowned for this, but it *is* very uncivil.'

We can say something rather similar of Johnson himself. He was, taking him for all in all, a man of scrupulous and even distinguished manners, but there were sudden and not too frequent occasions on which he lost control of himself, and did become very uncivil. And let it be granted that he suffered from one great and fundamental defect of conversational manners—he was an incurable gladiator; he was constantly talking not with, but at, the rest of the company. No doubt this—to use a singularly apposite modern phrase—imparted a punch to his style, and was highly popular, not only among the company in general, but in most cases with the victims themselves. An Englishman naturally loves a contest, and has a sporting delight in a clear-cut decision; and we can see that Boswell, at least, and probably others, so far from dreading the bull rush, were experts in the use of the red rag. But the fact that Johnson was doing the very thing his audience expected of him, does not prove that he was taking the right way to perfect the art of conversation.

He certainly knew the better way well enough; one of the few occasions on which he is known to have submitted meekly to rebuke being when, on his

tour through the Hebrides, he had started disputing the remark of a certain Dr Campbell on the subject of Tull's *Husbandry*, and received the answer: 'Come, we do not want to get the better of one another: we want to increase each other's ideas.'

'His conduct on this occcation', comments Boswell, 'proves how easily he could be persuaded to talk from a better motive than victory.'

Now Dr Campbell's observation, bold and penetrating as it must have seemed under the circumstances in which it was spoken, would have been a simple truism in the *salons*, a thing that a gentleman would no more have needed to be told, than to remove his hat and not to clinch his arguments by physical violence. Johnson's chief shortcoming must be admitted to have been less his fault—though a fault he knew it to be—than his misfortune in his environment. How precisely are we to account for this difference? Less, I think, in any superiority of the French over the British mentality, a superiority that would have been hard indeed to establish in the hey-day of Goldsmith, of Hume, of Burke, of Gibbon, of Chesterfield, of Cavendish, of Johnson himself; much more in a cause that we have found to be vital to the success of conversation, the fact that the feminine influence was never dominant in Johnson's

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circle, or the English society in which he moved, as it was in the rooms where La Deffand, La Lespinasse, and the rest of that noble sisterhood, held unquestioned sway over the greatest wits and geniuses of their time.

There were no doubt women who played their parts in Johnson's life, and shared in many of his conversations. Mrs Thrale, in particular, was the nearest approach that England could produce to the Parisian hostess—but an approach how distant is that of this slightly blatant but by no means dominating personality! How seldom do we find her, or any other woman, leading or influencing the conversation!

Johnson has been described as a man's talker, and so, in the main, he was. He was clubbable, at a time when the club was still an institution in the masculine gender: the urbanity cultivated, under feminine auspices, in the *salons* was hardly to be expected, in the same delicacy of refinement, at the Coalhole or the Cheshire Cheese. The comradeship of men, and particularly of Englishmen who, in that age, prided themselves on nothing so much as their bluff downrightness, was tolerant of a good many hard knocks—

Blows received and many blows repaid.

But the kind of talk that greatly finds quarrel in a straw is no vehicle for the finer subtleties of thought. Much of Johnson's extraordinary vividness comes

from his habit of seeing everything in sharply defined primary colours: there is no elusiveness of shading, no reaching out after a truth that just eludes the grasp; all is as plain as a pikestaff and as precisely defined as the terms of a conveyance at any rate ought to be. The nail is hit exactly on the head every time, and driven home with a clean blow, even if it splits the wood.

We have to allow for all these shortcomings, before justifying our estimate of Johnson as the greatest talker of the great age of modern conversation. But when all is said, the sheer genius of the man raises him head and shoulders above any of his contemporaries one could name. The first duty of a talker is after all to be interesting, and more than merely interesting: he must, to achieve perfection, be continually surprising and delighting his audience, so as to hold their attention spellbound. This test Johnson passes triumphantly; nay more, we must allow him to be the only recorded talker—with one obvious and divine exception—who passes with full marks. Occasionally, perhaps, he may have browbeat his audience, but we can never for one moment imagine him to have bored it. Just as Queen Victoria, to her dying day, is rumoured never to have set eyes on a railway ticket, so we may well credit Johnson with

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never having set eyes on a yawn, at a close enough range to be also within earshot.

He possessed, as few celebrated talkers have ever done, the secret of never allowing talk to rise, or degenerate, into anything but talk. Never did he, like the Platonic Socrates, concentrate and prolong it into a philosophic disquisition; never, like Macaulay, did he insist on making a habit of burying his audience beneath the accumulations of a vast memory; never, like George Meredith's people, did he challenge them to the feats of a Houdini by tying them up in intellectual knots; never, like Coleridge, did he think aloud to straighten out the metaphysical cobwebs at the back of his own mind; he neither preached nor orated; he never condescended to the pettiness of buffoonery. Nothing is more distinctive of his conversational style than its extraordinary adaptability: it was no part of his technique to dictate the subject, or to guide the talk into channels of which he had studied the navigation; he was only too delighted for one or other of the company to start any topic whatever, and he would instantly switch over the whole concentrated force of his genius to its elucidation; nor ever, on any recorded occasion, did the most bizarre or unexpected subject ever cause him an instant's hesitation, or prevent his going straight

to its heart with what his hearers, at any rate, felt to be the last and decisive word.

Could anything be more superb than his response to the irrepressible Boswell, who had evidently determined to stretch his powers to their utmost limit by asking:

‘If, sir, you were shut up in a castle, with a newborn child with you, what would you do?’

Now if Johnson had incontinently exploded into a denunciation of Boswell’s lack of good sense and good manners in asking such a question, who would have blamed him? But the old gladiator had sensed a conversational challenge, and it was not in his nature to take advantage of even the most legitimate excuse for evading it. But to have merely addressed himself to the answer without exposing the inopportuneness of the question would have been passive; quick as thought comes the counter:

‘Sir, I should not much like my company.’

Boswell, having received this palpable hit in the first exchange, has no reply, except humbly to persist with the original question. To this Johnson, having established his own superiority, is now prepared to address himself with simple seriousness. He is transported in imagination to this inescapable tower; he, the childless widower, addresses all his powers to

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this grotesque task of mothering what may not inconceivably have been the child of his dreams:

‘I must have all the conveniences. If I had no garden I would make a shed on the roof and take it there for fresh air. I should feed it and wash it much, and with hot water to please it, not with cold water to give it pain.’

‘But sir,’ objects Boswell, ‘does not heat relax?’

‘Sir,’ is the reply, ‘you are not to imagine the water is to be very hot. I would not *coddle* the child. Sir, the hardy method of treating children does no good. I’ll take you five children from London who shall cuff five Highland children.’

What has happened? Here, at a moment’s notice, are ideas of infantile hygiene being thrown off, that go far beyond the purview of the eighteenth century. It was no less than ninety-two years after this conversation that Herbert Spencer was to rediscover, and state at considerable length, the doctrine that Johnson here condenses into two or three sentences—and in the England of 1861, Spencer was considered almost impossibly advanced.

But Johnson was no possessor of a one-track mind, like Spencer’s, for in the next moment we have an instance of its extraordinary adaptability and truth to fact. Boswell has urged in his support that good

living makes Londoners strong. But Johnson, instead of murmuring the obvious affirmative, is round on him at once with:

‘Why, sir, I don’t know that it does. Our chairmen from Ireland, who are as strong men as any, have been brought up on potatoes. Quantity makes up for quality.’

And so the wonderful performance goes on, never dwelling long enough on any one topic to exhaust its interest, springing perpetual fresh surprises, never marking time or dropping into the obvious. And always, which is perhaps its crowning merit, perfect in form! We know how writers like Flaubert or Pater spent long, painful thought, and undertook endless revision, to get the perfectly expressive word or phrase: Johnson never failed to find either on the tip of his tongue. We may fairly challenge anyone to go through the whole vast bulk of Boswell’s memoirs and say, of a single sentence of Johnson’s: ‘This might have been better put, in such and such a way.’

An instance of this astonishing, and unfailing, verbal felicity is quickly forthcoming. The conversation, after touching lightly on the dream child’s education (‘No, sir, I shall *not* have a pleasure in teaching it’), and after a side glance at natural affection, switches over

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from the tower, before the fable has had time to get tedious, to Russia, and so to the same problems of increasing population that were to engage the attention of Malthus. Says Johnson:

'I know of no way to make them breed more than they do. It is not from reason and prudence that people marry, but from inclination. A man is poor, he thinks: "I cannot be worse, so I'll e'en take Peggy."'

Could anything be more consummately phrased? And yet this is but one typical example of hundreds—we might almost say thousands—of Johnsonian sayings.

Or do we want to see him in his more playful and intimate mood? Let us glance at him through the eyes of Fanny Burney, to whom, when it is announced that Mrs Montagu is expected, he suddenly bursts out after 'seesawing' for a little in silent amusement at his own fancy:

'Down with her, Burney!—down with her!—spare her not!—attack her, fight her, and down with her at once! You are a rising wit and she is at the top; and when I was nothing, and nobody, the joy of my life was to fire at all the established wits and then everybody loved to halloo me on. But there is no game now; everybody would be glad to see me conquered: but then, when I was new, to vanquish the

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great ones was all the delight of my poor soul! So at her Burney—at her, and down with her!’

In all this, we must remember the caution given in our first chapter, against accepting the written records of conversation for the whole and literal truth. But of Johnson we can feel sure that the written record comes as close to the reality as is humanly possible. There is a chiselled formality about his sayings, as well as a packed conciseness, that makes them stick in the memory; most of them would cease to be Johnsonian if they were substantially paraphrased, though as a matter of fact Boswell was enough of a Johnsonian himself to be capable of a little retouching. But it is significant that the Johnson of Mrs Thrale¹ talks in a manner not recognizably different from him of Boswell.

Johnson’s faculty, unique in conversational record, of instantly and intuitively hitting on the most telling conceivable style of delivering himself, is the more remarkable when we find that as a writer he is so often perversely and deliberately long-winded, jamming his thought into the strait-waistcoat of a pompously verbose style. If we say that never for a moment in his conversation did he sink to the level of boredom, it would hardly be too much to add that seldom in

¹ Afterwards Mrs Piozzi.

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his long series of articles for the *Rambler*, to which he devoted himself with such prayerful earnestness, did he rise far above it. There are even recorded instances in his talk when he attempted the supreme outrage of pulling up, after one of his characteristic utterances, and trying to recast into 'style'. But the true instinct was happily too strong—it was not in Johnson to de-Johnsonize the talk that is his title to immortality.

To understand the uniqueness, in a conversational age, of his mastery of the art, we have but to compare him with any other of its famous exponents. The most obvious comparison is that with Goethe, who was already a famous young man when Johnson was at his conversational zenith, but who only found his Boswell, during his Olympian old age, in a certain Eckermann. That Goethe had a mind incomparably richer than that of Johnson, and that his literary genius was of an altogether different and superior order, not the most insularly patriotic John Bull will be concerned to deny: but that as a talker alone he could hold a candle to Johnson, it would take an extremely well-disciplined subject of the Third Reich to maintain.

The unfailing significance, and frequent profundity, of Goethe's talk must be apparent to any reader of

Eckermann's memoirs. Imagine any modern countryman of his capable of uttering such a sentiment as:

‘National hatred is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture.’

Though it is perhaps best not to imagine what would be his fate if he did utter it. And Goethe had an almost universal range of interest; in all the arts and all the sciences he was at home, and he would launch out not only with enthusiasm, but with the knowledge of an expert, on any sort of topic. Even to the modern reader, his talk is a mine of instruction.

So far—that is to say—as, in the Johnsonian sense, it is talk at all. For, whether it is that Goethe's spirit was too vast to be confined, or that he was too self-consciously Olympian, he never seems to have seriously attempted to adapt himself to conversational limits. Once he is started off, his audience hardly seems to exist; the cut and thrust of debate are not for him—never will he condescend to play even first fiddle in a conversational symphony; he concentrates on his subject, and puts the whole machinery of his mind to work on it, not infrequently overtime: the result being a monologue, or spoken essay, the record of which may extend for pages, over which we may ruminate with profit and admiration, but which

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never startles us with the thrill of the inspired response, that solves the problem in a sentence, or lifts it to a higher plane of discussion.

It may be irreverent to say that, after Boswell, the reader finds Eckermann's record pretty heavy going: but then, one cannot help feeling that it was just the reverence that he everywhere encountered, and probably expected, that was Goethe's undoing as a talker. Nobody ever contradicts or challenges him; his most sententious pronouncements are received as the oracles of a god. Eckermann, for instance, a perfect compound of bore and lickspittle, professes himself 'particularly struck' by Byron's *Cain*:

'It is indeed admirable,' says Goethe, 'its beauty is such as we shall not see a second time in the world.'

We can almost hear the gasp of admiration that follows this extraordinary pronouncement, and Eckermann is quick to chime in with his punctual tribute of confirmation.

But imagine Johnson, in his most dictatorial mood, laying down the law with such pointless self-assurance; or imagine Johnson's set allowing judgment to go in his favour by general default!

We may best appreciate the difference between Johnson and Goethe as conversationalists, by likening Johnson to a commander of a lightly equipped

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force who, the moment he encounters opposition, detects the weak point in the enemy's position, and instantly launching his attack from the most unexpected angle, ends the business with one annihilating blow: Goethe, on the other hand, advances with a magnificently appointed Grand Army, turning neither to the right nor to the left; not condescending to manœuvre, but deploying his entire force; putting down a barrage of every gun, light and heavy, that can be brought into line; calling up the reserves, and advancing deliberately, majestically, over the flattened remains of the enemy trenches.

Which is, curiously enough, what Johnson himself too often aspired to do, when he exchanged the tongue for the pen.

CHAPTER XVII

CONVERSATIONAL DEADWEIGHT

IT is easy to fall into the fallacy that every lady and gentleman of France lived and talked up to the standard set by the *salons*, or that the kind of talk recorded in Boswell is what we might reasonably expect to hear if we could travel back through time, and be received at the table of that ancestor who looks down with such self-satisfied assurance from the frame above the dining-room sideboard. If such a miracle did indeed come our way, we should not improbably be destined to the shock of our lives; we might find our Very Great Uncle coarse, disagreeable, and almost incredibly slow in the uptake of anything except port. We have, of course, only to read the literature of the time, whether of fact or fiction, to realize how very little culture was able to do at any time for people like the Vicomte in *Le Misanthrope*, whose favourite amusement was spitting into a well to make circles, or Fielding's Squire Western, who nearly drove his daughter out of the

room by roaring out songs about maidenheads on the occasion of her wedding breakfast. So imperfectly did the spirit of the *salons* pervade the highest regions of all, that we find His Most Christian Majesty Louis XV encouraging the promoted prostitute, Madame Dubarry, to interlard her conversation with the choicest obscenities she had picked up on the streets, and the proudest noblemen of France following suit with courtier-like adaptability.

It is the rarest of all *tours de force* of literary genius to give a faithful, and at the same time readable, transcription of the dull average talk of dull average people. It has been done in our own time by Mr Sinclair Lewis, who has devoted a whole book, *The Man who knew Coolidge*, to a horribly realistic transcription, which miraculously fails to be boring, of the lucubrations of bores: it was done at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Dean Swift, who with deadly versimilitude sets down a day's talk, from morning to bedtime, of a typical collection of those beaux and belles, who look so dainty when romanticized by the modern draughtsman.

This is no satiric extravaganza; every one of the sentences put into the mouths of Swift's puppets was recognizably what might have been spoken by any average member of the contemporary smart set, and

indeed a good deal of this spurious coin of conversation might, with a minimum of alteration, pass current in corresponding circles nowadays. The only departure from reality is that Swift concentrates his whole attention upon one habit, which is the bane of conversation, and the inevitable resort of those incapable of sustaining it on a rational level—the habit, that is to say, of using stereotyped phrases, or *clichés*, instead of clothing each fresh thought with appropriate words. To this, he seems to imply, must conversation sink, the moment it ceases to be practised as one of the creative arts.

It is extraordinary how familiar these vapidities of good Queen Anne's time sound to modern ears. Somebody, for instance, has accused Colonel Atwit of having, on the previous night, gone to court drunk (his modern counterpart would have added another *cliché* by calling it 'well oiled' or 'bottled'):

'You must own', puts in young Tom Neverout, 'you had a drop in your eye; when I left you, you were half seas over.'

They start gossiping about some female acquaintance.

'She will pass muster,' says one; another dares swear 'she's no chicken, she's on the wrong side of thirty if she's a day'; to another, she 'looks as if

butter wouldn't melt in her mouth', while yet another doubts that 'her dancing days are over'.

And so on and so forth, until the number of society *clichés*—for Swift makes it a point of honour never to make use of the same one twice—easily tops the thousand. It is only because there has never been another Swift, that the record has not been brought up to date for each subsequent generation. Anyone who cares to consult his or her own experience, will be forced to admit that, so far from having improved since Swift's time, the *clichés* have become no less numerous, and even more silly.

It is easy to prescribe a simple remedy, by telling people to cut *clichés* out of their conversation; but that is just as if you were to tell somebody that the way of curing his fever was to stop having a temperature. Once the talk loses the creative impulse that raises it to the level of art, or becomes the expression of minds with nothing in them worth expressing, there is no help for it, if talk is to go on at all, but for it to make shift with forms of predeceased ideas, as a child might pick up empty shells on the beach to stock his aquarium.

But then, the question arises whether, under these circumstances, it is worth while going on with the talk for a moment longer than necessary. For when

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it ceases to be alive, it is no wonder that it becomes deadly. A company of people with empty minds and voluble tongues, all set down together, are apt to resolve themselves into a committee of torturers, practising their art on each other. Who or what shall deliver them from the body of this death? Is not any other activity an acceptable substitute for the clank of this incessant wind-grinding, and the labour of keeping it up?

And so we find that the human mind, always resourceful, seeks to compensate itself for its failure to find satisfaction in the exchange of its ideas, by diverting itself to other, and less noble, pursuits. Of these, one of the most favoured is drinking, not as a stimulant to conversation, but as a means of stupefying or exalting the mind by what might best be described as direct action.

Then, again, there is the alternative provided by games, those especially whose main attraction is in the scope they afford to the gambling instinct. Cards, invented to amuse a madman, and since known as the Devil's picture books, have provided what is probably the most effective means ever afforded to mortals of killing the time vouchsafed to them between two eternities. They have certainly proved the greatest of all conversational antidotes. Once let a

company be fixed in the contemplation of these pasteboard symbols, and talk becomes a prohibited activity; the game itself grips them with a fascination that may, in extreme instances, cause it to be prolonged to the limits of physical endurance. We know how, in the eighteenth century, the members of fashionable clubs would sit up all night playing for heavy stakes, and sometimes rise up at dawn, ruined.

We use the word hypnotic advisedly, because to a watcher, not under the spell, the fascination of gambling is almost impossible to rationalize. I have more than once gone into the Casino at Nice, to watch the popular non-card game called boule—baccarat is played by the *élite* behind closed doors—and to try to discover what pleasure anybody but the municipal authorities can derive from this sure and certain way of levying contribution on all comers. The principle is transparent—you, with eight chances out of seventeen, pit your luck against the bank, with nine. To anyone with the remotest inkling of the theory of probability, it is obvious that the longer you go on playing, the more sure you can be of losing ten out of every ninety francs you invest in the concern—but the gambler lives in a world in which the mathematics are abolished, and in which twice two may well equal five for his sake. Watch the faces of

the people round the table—their strained and agonized expressions; their perpetually renewed horror at each fresh failure of laws, which some would deem binding on God, to be relaxed in their especial favour.

No one imagines the atmosphere of a quiet rubber to bear any other relation to this, than that of a glass of mild sherry to a tumbler of absinthe; but the effect of both is to provide a means of holding people absorbed and silent for an indefinite period, and it is that aspect which concerns us here.

To ask whether it is right or wrong to kill time or stimulate interest in this way, is really meaningless. Most people would agree that it is kinder to kill time painlessly than allow it to linger in boredom; and to deprive a party of contented bridge players of their cards, in order to force them to sit round the table and endure one another's talk, would be beneath the humanity of a Sioux: but then again, to have forced Socrates to spend his evenings at the card table, instead of in conversation, would have been worse than the hemlock to him, whatever it might or might not have been to his listeners. It would be preposterous to imagine Christ making up a four, if such a thing had been possible, with the household at Bethany; and that, not on any grounds of its being sinful—for He had all the sociability of a true Bohemian—but

simply because He would have had something infinitely better to do with His time, and the last thing that any of His hearers would have wanted would have been to kill time passed in His company. Dr Johnson was tolerant of cards, as he was of other amusements, but he did not pass his evenings playing them, because time subtracted from conversation would have been to him, and his hearers, a dead loss; nor can we imagine that cards formed a principal attraction of such *salons* as that of Julie de Lespinasse. But those whose conversation is a weariness of the spirit are surely well advised to seek refuge in any substitute that will keep the wolf of ennui from the door.

Morphia, or even minute doses of veronal, are hardly to be recommended as the normal diet of healthy people, but once let anyone become incurably ill, or even feverish and sleepless, and they may, in moderation, become blessed means of relief. Cards, and their allies of the Casino, are, in their use and abuse, drugs.

It is related of a bridegroom just married to a rather plain prima donna that, on beholding her face for the first time in the light of dawn, he exclaimed, in agony:

‘Oh, for the love of Mike, get up and sing!’

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And so, on listening to some people's conversation, one is tempted to cry:

'For the love of merciful Heaven, cut it short, and get out the bridge tables!'

In the palmiest days of the eighteenth century, the amount of time passed in conversation must have been exceeded by that devoted to escaping from it to the card table or less reputable ways of diversion. Even in France, the artists of conversation must have been a heroic minority among their own class, and the noblemen, like the Prince de Conti, who could hold their own in the *salons*, were almost certainly less numerous than those like the Chevalier de Rohan-Chabot, who had Voltaire thrashed by his valets for a too successful repartee, and like their host, the Duc de Sully, who could only find occasion for mirth in such treatment of an acknowledged literary genius.

In England the cultured minority, which took its lead from Paris, was even more exiguous. Such artists of life as Chesterfield and Horace Walpole were like evangelists of a new gospel sent forth among barbarians—the work of Beau Nash in transforming Bath would have qualified him for a halo if civilization had its saints—but on their country estates, large and small, which they seldom left, flourished the great semi-literate majority of hard-riding, hard-drinking,

and hard-swearers gentlemen, whom Horace Walpole lumped together under the expressive name of Beefs; while the rising commercial plutocracy was, if possible, on an even lower level of culture.

The light of the Chesterfields and Walpoles died with them. Now that Versailles had ceased to signify more than its component materials, there was no standard of taste except that which every man might set up for himself. The figure of the bluff, manly, Englishman, with no nonsense or finicking French polish about him, was that which emerged triumphant from the long war with Napoleon. It was only too frightfully true that the Battle of Waterloo was a triumph for the Playing Fields of Eton: the Beefs had it all their own way; culture had become a drug on the genteel market.

What chance is there for an art of conversation to flourish amid a squirearchy abandoned to an orgy of sport, and a middle class too much absorbed in competitive money-making to have time for getting itself civilized? It would hardly be too much to say that in the first half of the nineteenth century, every country house and mansion had become a generating centre of barbarism. The pursuit of that noisome animal, the fox, was a sadistic obsession; his cult even became sacramental to the extent of immersing his

reeking tail in the evening's drink; brutal eccentrics, not always of unimpeachable sanity, were canonized as famous sporting characters; books ceased to be purchased and pictures collected. Look at any of the innumerable sporting prints of that time; study the expression on the faces of 'some of the Right Sort'—so devoid of either intellect or feeling as to have a positively haunting effect—and you will realize how disastrously the class upon whom it devolved to maintain a standard of civilization, had failed to justify its privileges.

But we are only concerned with these historical tendencies, in so far as they bear upon our art of conversation. We have seen how serious were the rivals that it had in drink, cards and other methods of killing time; what bad effects sprang from even the partial segregation of the sexes; how vapid and commonplace, even in the most brilliant period and among the most educated class, average conversation was apt to be. We now have another adverse factor, in the exaltation of muscle over brain that was so characteristic of nineteenth-century England, and is now threatening to prevail over all countries inhabited by the white man.

This, which is as different as possible from the harmony of body and spirit aimed at by the Greeks,

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and the very negation of the Christian view of the body as a vehicle or temple of the spirit, is doubly fatal to conversation, by inhibiting and by dominating it. The Elect of the Right Sort have no use for such fatigue-poisoned wits as the day's sport has left, except to relax them in sleep or revive them with drink. Early in the century the regular and expected sequel to a hunt was for the Right Sort to get rid of its womenfolk, and drink itself blind or bawdy. Under the shadow of Victorian respectability this sort of flamboyant animality went out of fashion, only to give place to what was really a more complete surrender to barbarism, when, in the second half of the century, the ladies showed an increasing disposition to abandon their stewardship of the graces, and seek admission in their turn to the Right Sort. The honour that had been accorded to great hostesses and arbitresses of the elegancies, was destined in course of time to be transferred to athletes, and ultimately aviators, more or less of the female gender.

This latter-day enslavement of the mind to its own body has inoculated conversation with a germ of futility beyond even Swift's diagnosis. His dullest talkers never descended to the interminable recital and discussion of things done in sport and play, or built up conversation out of their technique; and yet

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of such elements is a great and increasing proportion of modern talk compounded. A faculty of speech that disdains employment with art or science, nature or poetry, will be used to elucidate by what precise means an approach was bunkered at the seventh, an otter torn to pieces beside a Devon stream, or a pheasant just sufficiently peppered to ensure its freezing to death in the course of the ensuing night. And we talk of progress!

CHAPTER XVIII

LATTER DAY ANARCHY

NOBODY in his senses would wish to put the clock back to the eighteenth century, or to set up, in the twentieth, a replica of the Versailles civilization. That scheme of living must have been discarded anyhow, even if there had been no French Revolution, and it is worse than futile to disinter old bottles for the reception of new wine. But it is undoubtedly the fact, whatever conclusion we may choose to draw from it, that the reduction of Versailles to a lifeless shell, and ultimately to a museum, cast a blight over the art of conversation, from which it has never to this day recovered. For though all other arts may yield their secret to individual genius, that of conversation, being essentially co-operative, depends upon the goodwill of all concerned to conform to some agreed standard, and pursue some common purpose of well-being.

The nineteenth century was prolific, beyond all record, of marketable goods, but of talk, as of por-

celain, there had ceased to be any intelligent appreciation. Even in the land of the *salons*, and the acknowledged metropolis of civilization, it almost ceased to be cultivated as one of the fine arts. The vulgarity of the First Empire was followed, under the Restored Monarchy, by the heartless and tasteless cult of getting on, in the most material sense, that forms the theme of Balzac's vast and minute survey of the contemporary French scene. The men of art and letters tended more and more to retire into a community of their own, a Bohemia of specialists; and, as a result, art itself began to get more and more divorced from life, and consequently from talk.

It was still worse in England, where breeding had become more and more allied to horse-breeding, and there was no hope of civilized direction in an upper class that had allowed its intelligence to run to muscle. The men of artistic and literary distinction were defiant individualists, each with his own standards and ideals; intellectual society was an anarchy. Such noted conversationalists as there were, were generally playing their own hands against the rest of the company. Of one of the most admired talkers of Victorian society, Bernal Osborne, it is recorded that he was perpetually employing his wit for the purpose of snubbing or humiliating some other

member of the company; when Macaulay or Carlyle started off, anybody else would be lucky to get a word in edgeways, for the rest of the evening; as for Herbert Spencer, he was in the habit of providing himself with a pair of ear-plugs, which he would insert unobtrusively from time to time whenever the conversation of his neighbours failed to attract him.

The old lightness of touch, the faculty of gliding deftly over a subject, or changing it before it had time to become tedious, was far to seek in the nineteenth century. It was an age of deadly earnestness which, in talk, is seldom far removed from deadliness of another kind. The reply of Charles Lamb to Coleridge's 'Have you ever heard me preach?'—'I have never heard you do anything else', might have been made with scarcely less appositeness to how many worthies who flourished after both their deaths! An evening with either of the great Arnolds, father or son, with Ruskin or Gladstone, would no doubt have been an instructive and elevating experience, but we cannot help feeling that it would have imposed a certain strain on the audience. Gladstone, among his other great qualities, included a studied politeness, even to his youngest listener—but by all accounts it must have been a politeness more overwhelming to its

recipient than the verbal assault and battery of Dr Johnson.

This atmosphere of talk-stifling solemnity lay thickest of all upon the most exalted level. It would be difficult to imagine any freedom or sparkle of conversation at the court of Queen Victoria, in spite of the fact that she had served her apprenticeship with Lord Melbourne, one of the last and not the least delightful talkers in the old eighteenth-century tradition; but her husband, the Prince Consort, turned out to have all the major virtues, and hardly any of the minor graces; he had the faculty of making it seem as if everybody, himself included, were on full dress parade, and as if every word spoken in his presence were part of a ceremonial drill, to be enacted with true German precision. His wife who, not without cause, came to adore him, soon forgot Lord Melbourne's easy ways, and even if the most famous of all her reported sayings, the awful 'We are not amused', is to be accepted with as large a pinch of salt as most of the other sayings of history, it certainly does enable us to realize, as nothing else could, what freezing inhibition lay on talk at Windsor under her eye.

There is this, however, to be said for the seriousness imposed upon nineteenth-century talk; that it was apt to sink to an even lower plane when it was allowed

to lapse into humour. The absence of standards opened the door to the cheapest buffoonery, and in particular, to the constant short-circuiting of the conversational current by means of puns. Quite early in the century this nuisance had become endemic; anybody who wanted to be thought funny instantly started racking his brains for these meaningless coincidences of sound. Even Charles Lamb, who had all the talent of a great conversationalist, did his best to spoil it in this way, and the coruscations of lesser, but still celebrated wits, were on the level of children's riddles. I can remember one portentous compendium of wit and humour, of which, as a boy in the nineties, I was the proud possessor, that was almost entirely devoted to the jokes of these now happily forgotten worthies. One typical example sticks in my memory:

'When somebody asked Colman what was the span of a certain bridge, he replied: "If you go over it, you will be told" '—and lest the reader should be in any doubt about Colman's point, 'tolled' was thoughtfully added, in brackets. One gathers that it was impossible to address the most ordinary remark or question to Colman, and his like, without being countered by one of these inane quibbles. One wonders how any conversation worthy of human beings could have been carried on between such participants.

But, after all, we have no warrant for believing that it ever was.

Those who aspired to achieve, or revive, a better style of intercourse, were handicapped by the almost complete absence of conditions that could give the most accomplished of talkers scope for his talents. If one player in a symphony is the only one who is attempting to play in tune, he will probably end either by trying to play down all the rest with a solo, or else by overstraining himself and over-emphasizing his part. There was certainly no one in the Victorian, and few people in any age, who had a profounder insight into the principles of the conversational art than George Meredith, and his *Essay on Comedy* is certainly, of all English writings, that which comes nearest to embodying the authentic spirit of the *salons*. Even Mme du Deffand, the scrutiny of whose blind eyes could detect faults in almost everything ever written, would surely have accorded full marks to such a passage as the following:

‘The laughter of satire is a blow in the back or the face. The laughter of comedy is of impersonal and unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile; often no more than a smile. It laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called the humour of the mind.’

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But then Mme du Deffand was fortunate enough to move in a world of kindred spirits, all playing the game according to the same rules, and free to concentrate on the finer points of its style. There was no visible effort about even her most brilliant sallies; her '*ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte*' has all the nonchalant ease of Cyrano's rapier, concluding at one thrust a duel and a ballade.

But Meredith has to create the very conditions for his conversation out of nothing; he has to people the dream world of his writings with such talkers as he was never likely to meet in life; just as in life his most characteristic talk resembled that of a distinguished foreigner, holding forth in his own language to an audience unversed in its idiom.

The result, therefore, of his admirable purpose to infuse mind into conversation, was for mind to get out of governance and for the tongue to pose a series of intellectual conundrums that, if they were capable of elucidation, would require a pause of indefinite length after any average sentence, for the audience to explore its implications. The necessity was only not apparent to Meredith because, for want of a capable audience, he was really the whole time talking to himself, and in the language of his own mind.

Here, for instance, is a Meredithian authoress discussing her heroine with a critic:

‘I killed her; I could not let her live. You were unjust in accusing the authoress of heartlessness.’

‘If I did I retract. She steers too evidently from the centre of the vessel. She has the organ in excess.’

‘Proof that it is not squandered.’

‘The point concerns direction.’

‘Have I made so bad a choice of my friends?’

‘It is the common error of the sprightly to suppose that in parrying a thrust they blind our eyes’—and so on, with unflagging ingenuity; but it would be as reasonable to expect anyone to read the solution of *The Times* crossword puzzle by a mere glance down the lights, as to understand sentences like this as soon as hearing them. And yet how supremely great a conversationalist the world lost in Meredith, when he failed to be born into an age suited to his genius! As it was, he was never known in that capacity beyond the limited circle of his own friends.

Very different was the case of Oscar Wilde, who, by the sheer brilliance of his talk, seemed at one time as if he might be destined to inspire a conversational Renaissance. Rising on the crest of the æsthetic movement, he first amused and then dazzled fashionable society by the inexhaustible glow of his invention

and epigram, not only in his own person, but through the mouths of his characters on the stage. His best sayings were on everybody's lips; no party was complete without his presence.

His, like Meredith's, was essentially a one-man conversation. Only once did Wilde ever find a talker capable of holding the floor with him, and this was during his brief association with Whistler. If conversation is to be regarded as a duel, Whistler must be allowed to have wielded a deadlier weapon than Wilde, or any other talker of his age—with him it was either a lightning thrust to the heart, or a Mohock-like skill in pricking to death by inches: he never talked to please, always to win; he was the butterfly of his own signature, flourishing an envenomed sting. With Wilde it was different; if he was an egotist, it was an egotism without a spark of malice; he talked frankly to please, and never to wound. He radiated that urbanity without which there can be no art of conversation; his wit was as harmless as the glitter of light on waters. The pleasure he diffused was unalloyed by the discomfiture or humiliation of any of his audience; if the fathers of the utilitarian philosophy had been right about the possibility of measuring happiness, Wilde would surely rank among the most unquestionable benefactors of his kind, for

the pleasure he conferred in such abundant measure must be entered to the human account, without deduction, as pure gain.

In so far as he was an egotist and a poseur, it may be pleaded that the society in which he moved left him hardly any other choice; if he was to find scope for his genius, the only way was by himself taking charge of the conversation. London society in the eighties was, at heart, solidly and stolidly Philistine; the idea of its providing the personnel of a *salon* or a Johnsonian club was wildly impossible: the only way for an evangelist of civilized living was to attract attention to himself and his message, by violently stimulating, and even shocking, the dull apprehensions of his listeners.

But the man would be almost superhuman who could perform such feats without damage to his own soul, and Wilde was only too human. He did, by sheer brilliance and daring, fight down the scandalized hostility with which he was at first greeted; he succeeded—as Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater had never been able to do—in bringing culture into the limelight and making it fashionable. Even those to whom the very word ‘aesthetic’ signified the abomination of desolation, joined in creating the illusion of an aesthetic Belgravia; and the tragedy was that

the master illusionist became the victim of his own magic. He really imagined that the society of which he dreamed, the kingdom of sweetness and light, had actually come. Eighteenth-century Paris was born again on the shores of the Thames; and if even Wilde's power of self-deception was unequal to making another Versailles of Windsor, he had peopled his dream world with an aristocracy just such as that of Versailles appeared, with all its grosser quality effaced by the hand of time. He peopled his stage—legitimately enough if it had been done by way of conscious artifice—with an aristocracy not only of birth but of mind; enlightened Epicureans, with souls like stringed lutes on which all winds could discourse exquisite music. Oscar Wilde loved a title as perhaps only an Irishman can, not snobbishly, but romantically; the titles that he bestowed so freely on his creations were certificates, less of birth than of breeding; he created his peerage in the image of his own ideal—a rule of the best. The conversation of these people, as we hear it in the best of his plays, was of a uniform brilliance; a brilliance too emphatic and self-conscious, too lacking in the easy assurance of the *salons*, to have been bred in the bone, but incomparably superior to anything contained in the environment of Oscar Wilde. What he had really done was to surround him-

self with mirrors, multiplying reflections of himself disguised as Lord This and Lady That.

If he could only have stuck consistently to his own philosophy of conscious artifice, all might have been well. But he made the fatal confusion of art with reality: he sought to surround himself with real aristocrats, in the belief that he would have attained that cultured society in which alone he could live and converse beautifully. But the only lords that he found—or that there were for him to find—were the Lords of the Philistines, who tolerated him only so long as he was capable of amusing them, but who would never have dreamed of ranking the pursuit of beauty on a par with that of vermin, and one of whom, the author of the Queensberry Rules, was the means of toppling him from the summit of fame to a downfall so catastrophic that the very name of Oscar fell under a baptismal taboo. The whoop of righteous jubilation with which that tragedy was acclaimed, and the conclusion drawn from it in those very circles that Wilde had delighted, namely, that the conscious pursuit of beauty was a diseased, if not a criminal activity, showed plainly enough what were the fundamental and instinctive reactions of the class he had so grotesquely idealized.

The career of Oscar Wilde, so far from creating the conditions in which alone an art of conversation could flourish, made their realization more than ever improbable. Lower depths were to be plumbed than those, even, of the nineteenth century, throughout which a diminishing band of such social leaders as Lady Jeune and Lady Dorothy Nevill had contended, according to their lights, against the prevailing dullness, and had done their best to make a success of that doubly heavy function, the Victorian dinner party, with its ritual of usually forced conversation, meticulously divided between the partner on the right hand and the partner on the left.

It might have been hoped that the advent of Edward VII, as good a Parisian as ever was born out of France, and a master, when he cared to exercise it, of consummate social tact, would have changed things for the better. But Edward VII had never harboured much enthusiasm for art of any kind, and by his patronage of the bridge table he went far towards administering the *coup de grâce* to the already moribund art of conversation. The dinner parties got fewer and further between; less and less had the bright young people and the hustled old people of the twentieth century the leisure or concentration to make an art of speech. It was an age of ever-increasing

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noise, but as with the sea, the tumult was on the surface, and beneath was a profound and deathly silence.

CHAPTER XIX

CONVERSATIONAL GUIDES

BUT then, in the twentieth century who wants to make an Art of talking? I cannot avoid a certain apprehension lest readers may be thanking their lucky stars that they never had to undergo the ordeal of sitting for hours in the straight-backed chairs of the Louis Quinze style, listening to the talk of people to whom a laugh would have been a breach of good manners; and that it never fell to their lot to be cross-questioned by Socrates, or overwhelmed by Dr Johnson.

‘Don’t cultivate the cackle; cut it!’ may, in fact, be the demand of the modern spirit. There are so many alternatives to talk, and so little leisure for it. We have not the time that our ancestors had to spare, and what time we do get we can employ in ways unknown to them. We have our cheap Press, our moving pictures, our mechanical vehicles warranted to go anywhere and do anything, our dance halls and road houses, wireless and jazz bands—something else to do than sitting still trying to make conversation.

We have indeed; but it seems a queer theme for a panegyric of our modern age, that the best use we can make of its advantages is to provide ourselves with the means of escape and forgetfulness; that we have, in fact, invented so many adjuncts to life, as to have ceased to cultivate life itself, or to have lives worth cultivating.

That is what it amounts to when we talk of conversation as an extinct art. Even in the primeval cave, the mere act of sitting round the fire for a long evening's talk was the proudest assertion that man could make of his lordship of creation. For if we consider that the whole—or nearly the whole—time of animals is spent in the two unending tasks of maintaining their own life and the life of their species, we shall realize what a noble advance is signified by the provision of time in which the maintenance of life is taken for granted, and thought is taken for improving its quality. The animal is pleased enough if he succeeds in living at all, but for man it is necessary to live well, and the highest type will strive for nothing short of perfection.

To live well—to put it no higher than that—is manifestly inconceivable unless our talk is levelled up to the required standard. You cannot separate talk from life. The eightfold path of the Buddha

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proceeds by right thinking, right purpose, right speaking, and right action, in that order; and nothing that has happened since his day warrants us in believing that we can by-pass the third stage by listening, speeding, or a proper choice of stimulants; while as for writing, that stage is not alternative but additional, making the path ninefold.

Neither to-day, nor in any future of which it is possible to conceive, can it cease to be true that he who will master the art of life must be an artist also of conversation. Nor is it the individual alone on whom this burden is laid; for talk is a social activity, and without the right social environment, even genius can achieve nothing.

If therefore, we cease to cultivate the gift of speech for its own sake, we have forfeited our human birth-right of living well, and resigned ourselves to such an animal contentment with unadorned life, as to constitute the great and final surrender, the declaration of human bankruptcy. That remote ancestor of ours, who first came down from his native trees to run on two legs, would have proved the most tragic dupe on all record, if the result of his experiment had been merely to condemn his remote posterity to a struggle for an existence no nobler than his own, in surroundings far less pleasant than those

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of the primeval forest, and under the menace of disaster beyond the scope of his direst apprehensions.

For now we begin to realize a truth that has been implicit all along; namely, that in dealing with conversation we are dealing with life itself, in one of its essential aspects, and that it is impossible to think of talk except as of life overflowing into speech. He, therefore, who would perfect his speech is undertaking a task like that of Thor in the fable, who sought to batter in the skull of a sleeping giant, not knowing that the giant was the earth itself, and that even the hammer of a god could do no more than slightly dint its surface.

There have been innumerable attempts to isolate the art of conversation, and lay down rules for those who would practise it with success; in our own time it has been made the subject of commercial exploitation, and courses are advertised by means of which anyone who likes to put down the required fee will be turned out a finished conversationalist. You have got to do this and that, and avoid that and the other, and the thing is done: if you put yourself in the slot with the penny you are warranted to come out—at least, according to the text of one course which I have in my possession—perfectly equipped for conversing

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with labourers, foreigners, prisoners, clergymen, agents, collectors—‘in talking to a collector be pleasant and frank’—and in fact almost any conversational opponent imaginable, and in any conceivable situation: except—what is probably reserved for a senior course—those requiring such super-subtle finesse as that of a sportsman addressing a Master of Hounds after having just overridden one of them; a private explaining on parade to a sergeant-major the absence of a bolt to his rifle; or one of his clients making appropriate conversation for the couple of minutes, or so, of their acquaintance, with the hangman.

We do not say that such precepts are to be rejected without qualification. It is expedient, whenever possible, to be pleasant to collectors, and if not always expedient, at any rate virtuous, to be frank with them; it is wise, when the dentist produces his forceps, to think twice before starting a theological argument that may conceivably awaken the passions of an inquisitor; and it is as well, if anybody needs to be told these things, that he should be enlightened on them without delay. But can anyone imagine Boswell—and we can imagine it of Boswell more than most people—undertaking to fortify aspirants, in a course of six lessons, for an encounter with Johnson? There

were masters of dancing and deportment in the eighteenth century, but not, so far as we have ever heard, of conversation.

As a matter of fact, the modern commercial courses are not, in the sense in which we are using the word, conversational at all, but merely a series of hints or tips about the employment of speech for practical or business purposes, and not for the highest purpose of all, that of beautifying or perfecting life itself, an attainment that, even if it were possible, would scarcely meet an effective enough demand to make it commercially marketable.

It is a different matter when the acknowledged masters of conversation try to communicate its principles. Johnson, for instance, had a great many observations to make from time to time on the subject, as, for instance, when he defined its four essentials as knowledge, materials, imagination, and 'in the fourth place . . . presence of mind and a resolution not to be overcome by failures', a faculty in which he too modestly admitted himself to be lacking. Amongst other things, he deprecated ever speaking of another man in his presence, which, said he, 'is always indelicate and may be offensive', or of one's own self at all, except on the plainest matters of fact. All excellent advice, and the more pithy from being thrown off in the

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course of conversation and not embodied in a formal treatise; but advice for living quite as much as for talking, and amounting to this—that the best talk is the result of a richly stocked mind, and observance of the golden rule.

If one had to choose a written guide to the art of conversation, the palm might well be awarded to Dean Swift's *Hints towards an Essay on Conversation*, together with his few fragmentary aphorisms *Of Good Manners as to Conversation*. That latter title exactly expresses the standpoint of these admirably concise and lucid paragraphs. Manners, that makyth man, makyth also man's speech; good conversation is good manners made audible—another variation on the theme that talk is life.

That theme is developed by the greatest authority on manners that even the eighteenth century could produce, the Earl of Chesterfield, in the long series of his letters—never intended for publication—to his illegitimate son; a pathetic tribute of hope and affection, for Sisyphus himself did not undertake a more hopeless task than that of making a finished *grand seigneur* out of so unpromising a subject. In one of these he deals explicitly with the subject of conversation, and the gist of his advice is the same as Swift's. To put it in a way of which Chesterfield himself would surely

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have approved; life is manners and conversation is a branch of manners.

‘Talk often, but never long’, he counsels; ‘in that case, if you do not please, at least you are sure not to tire your hearers. Pay your own reckoning, but do not treat the whole company

‘Tell stories very seldom, and absolutely never but where they are very apt and very short. . . . To have frequent resources to narrative betrays great lack of imagination.

‘Never hold anybody by the button, or the hand, in order to be heard out; for, if people are not willing to hear you, you had much better hold your tongue than them

‘Avoid as much as you can, in mixed companies, argumentative, polemical conversations; which, though they should not, yet certainly do, indispose, for a time, the contending parties towards each other. . . .’

In short—take thought for your manners, and your speech will take thought for itself.

On the subject of personal vanity, Chesterfield goes even further than Johnson. After an analysis, worthy of Freud, of egotism and its social disguises, he concludes that:

‘The only sure way of avoiding these evils is,

never to speak of yourself at all. But when historically you are obliged to mention yourself, take care not to drop one single word that can directly or indirectly be construed as fishing for applause. Be your character what it will, it will be known, and nobody will take it on your word.'

After more advice of the same kind, we come to the conclusion—according at least to the philosophy of Chesterfield and his age—of the whole matter: honour the Graces, not in words only, for:

'If your air and address are vulgar, awkward, or *gauche*, you may be esteemed indeed, if you have great intrinsic merit, but you will never please; and without pleasing, you will rise but heavily.'

Be perfect at least in manner and manners; sacrifice to the Graces, sacrifice without ceasing, and it shall be well with you, in the only world that matters, for, says Chesterfield:

'They are not inexorable ladies, and may be had if properly and diligently pursued.'

And before we wave this aside as the counsel of a wicked and cynical old worldling, let us see how easily it could be transposed into the language of one who, though an apostle, owed no small part of his success to his tact and diplomatic genius:

'Though I speak with the tongues of men and

angels, and have not the Graces, I am become as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal . . .

‘Grace (not of course in the theological, but in the Chesterfieldian, sense of manners) suffereth long and is kind; Grace enviieth not; Grace vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil (“Neither”, says Chesterfield, “retail or receive scandal willingly”); rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth. . . . Grace never faileth.’

It fits perfectly, without the least straining of the sense. The altar on which Chesterfield sacrificed turns out to be that of the Unknown God; the Grace that he follows, when followed to the end, to be the chief of Christian virtues, applied to the circumstances, and no doubt limited by the outlook of the society in which he moved.

By every path we reach the same conclusion. In setting out to master the art of conversation, we find ourselves confronted with that of life itself, in all its length and depth and breadth and height. You cannot isolate the part from the whole; you cannot learn to talk without first learning to live.

CHAPTER XX

THE QUINTESSENCE OF CONVERSATION

THIS then is the conclusion at which we have arrived, that to master the art of conversation nothing less is required than to master that of Life itself. Life is indeed more than talk; but there is no aspect or phase of it by which talk is not enriched, or in which the master of conversation can afford to be lacking. It is the whole man of whom talk is the expression; and the perfect conversationalist, if such a thing were conceivable, would be nothing less than the perfect man.

We now see how futile it is to dream of laying down rules, or devising courses, as if one could specialize in conversation, like accountancy or wood-carving. No doubt there are a few minor points of technique that might conceivably be studied with advantage, though it is doubtful whether any talker of genius has ever particularly bothered to do so: modulation of the voice; pause and emphasis; the employment, if any, of gesture; correct articulation; and the cure of

such tricks as stammering, giggling, wheezing, and provincial or academic accent. Even so it is doubtful whether the effect of such training might not be to engender a gingerly self-consciousness, that would leave the last state of our conversational aspirant worse than the first. And anyhow, these considerations only touch the outermost fringe of the subject.

Beyond that, it is impossible for even the masters of conversation to indicate any way of right talking, that is not equally a way of right living. Swift, Johnson, Chesterfield, can do no more than propound their philosophies of life as the secret of their art. Hence the answer to the natural enquiry, whether to cultivate an art of conversation means setting up the system of the eighteenth century in the twentieth, and implies the slogan of 'back to the *salons*!', will be in an unhesitating negative, unless we are prepared to maintain that the art of living was made perfect under the auspices of Louis Quinze, and that the heavenly city of our dreams is not the New Jerusalem but the New Versailles; which, as Euclid remarked of less monstrous assertions, is absurd. But the eighteenth century may indeed claim this advantage over the twentieth, that it did, according to the light that was in it, cultivate the art of life; whereas we are content to bend the whole of our energies to the increase of

life's accessories, in the faith that if we provide for the meat and raiment, the life will take care of itself.

No doubt the way of life pursued by the elegant ladies and gentlemen of the old régime left much to be desired; that tree was rotten before it fell. There was a heartlessness, a restriction of outlook, perhaps even a superficiality, from which not even the *salons* and their talk were exempt; these things no one in his senses would want to revive. But people of that time did, in the phrase of its most representative man of genius, cultivate their own gardens; they did more, they joined in cultivating one common garden of social intercourse. Whatever their faults and limitations, it could not be said of their life, as it might with only too much plausibility of ours:

*'Tis an unweeded garden
That runs to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.*

Their scheme of life was no doubt marred by an excess of formality; there was not enough depth beneath their surface, or fire to kindle their thought to the glow of perpetual creativeness. But it was at least a scheme and not an anarchy; it was the improvement of life at which it aimed; whereas, when modern man talks of planning, his mind at once leaps to the

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installation of machinery, and estimates success by statistics. Our ancestors thought more nobly of their species, and planned accordingly; and in so doing, who shall deny that they chose the better part?

It is for us to recapture something of their spirit, however much we feel ourselves competent to improve upon their methods. What profit have we of our machine power, if we should prove to have forfeited the most delightful and intimate of all arts of life? A society that can produce but cannot talk, may be a model of disciplined efficiency; but it represents the final defeat of human civilization, the degradation of man to the level of the insect. Even that is putting it too high; for so long as we are merely producing, however scientifically, we are in no way superior to our machine parts: it is when we lay down tools and start talking that we become human, for then we are no longer enslaved to things, but free for the cultivation of our very lives, of which talk is the flower.

This, then, is the first and indispensable requirement of the conversational art, that we get back to a right sense of values; that we only prize our material and scientific progress in so far as it sets us free for the supreme purpose of living well, in the belief that the only real wealth is reckoned in terms not of what

we have, but of what we are, that of which our talk is the outward and audible manifestation. This which, when it is put down in black and white, reads so like a platitude, stands, if its true meaning is appreciated, in flat and increasing defiance to the whole working philosophy of the modern age, which is based on the assumption that if you only provide for the meat and the raiment, the life will take care of itself.

To put our belief in a way that at least will not incur the reproach of obviousness: however important it may be to have statistics of the things that people and their machines are producing, it would be of incomparably greater significance if we could know the sort of things that they are saying to one another. For words are the commerce of souls, and the values of that traffic, though imponderable, real and ultimate. We can only price things.

Which brings us to the second fundamental requirement, that which we have already comprehended in the original sense of that grand old word, manners. It is for the very reason of its being the commerce of souls, that talk is more dependent on manners than any other human activity. When we converse we are more wholly and intimately than at any other time members one of another. We can

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play music, or paint, or even put down our thoughts on paper very contentedly in solitude and for our own private satisfaction; but it is poor fun, even on a desert island, conducting a *tête à tête* of Robinson with Crusoe. Where two or three are gathered together, trying to combine their very different instruments and capacities in a symphony of words, there is the ever-present danger of discord, or friction, tending to chaos.

It is only by a style of harmonious co-operation so deeply ingrained as to have become a second nature, that conversation can be purged of this, its most besetting evil, and raised to the level of an art. That is why its acknowledged masters, when they set themselves to expound its principles, concentrate so exclusively on manners. Even in writing, the most essential quality of a finished style is that unruffled urbanity, that persuasive and sweet-tempered reasonableness, the lack of which, as Matthew Arnold pointed out in a famous essay, has proved so disastrous a handicap to the genius of English prose writers. But if urbanity is the first point of style, even in writing, where every offence against it is only transmitted at second-hand and robbed of most of its sting, how much more does it comprehend the very alpha and omega of style in conversation! To

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say that manners makyth talk would be putting it too low: it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that manners *is* talk.

Right values and good manners, these, with all that they include or imply, are the foundations without which an art of conversation cannot stand. But there is a third thing needful without which it cannot achieve perfection.

Conversation is life, and life, in proportion as it is alive, is creative. It is the machine, and the robot, that are turned out to function to standard; it is only mediocrity whose speech is capable of prediction, and, either in matter or manner, conforms to any pattern whatever. The answers of genius have the double quality of taking the audience completely by surprise, and yet of seeming obviously right, once they are spoken: as for instance when Whistler, asked in the witness box by the Attorney General whether he charged two hundred guineas for the labour of two days, drawled back:

‘No—I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime,’ or as a lady of my acquaintance replied to the boast of a rather disputatious ecclesiastic, that the priest has always triumphed in the long run:

‘Yes indeed, as he triumphed at Calvary.’

The supreme conversationalist would be perpetually

creative. Everything that he ever said, even in his lightest vein, would bear the stamp of his genius; it would either be the last word on the subject, or more likely, since it is the essence of conversation to be continuously constructive, would raise it to a superior plane; would reconcile contradictions in some higher order of truth; would present the whole subject in a new light; would reveal hitherto unsuspected aspects, dissipate fog, and straighten out tangles. Perfect mastery of any art proceeds in a succession of master-pieces; the least of its products justifies the claim:

He nothing common did nor mean.

But we are talking of perfection, and we may well ask whether such a phenomenon as that of the perfect talker, the conversational Homer who never nods, is conceivable; or at any rate, whether it can be said, with the remotest plausibility, ever to have occurred.

There is, I would submit, as far as our knowledge goes, but one Person, and one alone, on Whose behalf such a claim could conceivably be advanced.

We wish to regard the matter from the most mundane and non-controversial standpoint. Whether and in what sense a Nazarene carpenter could have been a Son of God, is a problem with which we need not concern ourselves, except to point out this one

thing: that in so far as perfection is claimed for His personality, it must be claimed equally for His conversation. The talk is the man, and human weakness in the one would be the reflection of a corresponding weakness in the other. Unless therefore a man feels himself justified in claiming, without any sort of reservation, that the talk of Christ satisfies every requirement in the highest conceivable degree, and to a degree unapproached by that of Socrates, Johnson, or any other talker, it is impossible for him, without gross inconsistency, to remain a Christian in the ordinary sense of the word. There is no escaping from it; the idea of a Divine Being who is not also the supreme and infallible artist of conversation, is a monstrous absurdity, a contradiction in terms.

Here is a test that every man can apply for himself, without the qualifications of a specialist in historical criticism. You have the records of His alleged sayings before you; and in so far as you are prepared to accept them for Gospel, you can judge for yourself.

It would be far beyond the scope of this book to argue the case, for or against. I would much prefer it, if I could induce anybody to approach it himself from the standpoint I have suggested, and decide whether, if he had chanced to come across the Gospel records for the first time, without any sort of precon-

ception about their subject, he would, or could, have said, after full deliberation and with entire candour:

‘Here at last is the *ne plus ultra* of conversational achievement; here the artist who abides no man’s question.’

And then if he is determined to add no more and no less than the conclusion warrants:

‘This, it is conceivably possible, may be the Son of God.’

It will be enough to say that such a claim for Christ appears to be the only one of its kind for which it would be possible to hold a brief, without its being ruled at the outset, by any competent judge, that there was no case to go to a jury. There is no such conjunction anywhere else recorded of utter unexpectedness with self-evident rightness, as confronts us not in one, but, it may plausibly be maintained, in every one of the Gospel sayings:

‘Render unto Cæsar. . . . Go thou and do likewise. . . . Betrayest thou the Son of Man with a kiss? . . . Neither on this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem. . . . Put up thy sword within its sheath, for all they that take the sword. . . . Thou art troubled about many things. . . .’

Sayings—and they could be multiplied indefinitely—that it is not necessary to quote in full, because they

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have passed into the common heritage of civilization.

There is one gap in the record that, though perhaps inevitable, we cannot fail to deplore. We have no account of Jesus in His lighter moods; of His familiar talk at the table of His friends at Bethany, or in the thoroughly disreputable company towards which, as the Pharisees did not fail to point out, He tended to gravitate.

Moreover, unless we are to go the whole way with the fundamentalists, we are faced with the difficulty of deciding to what extent we can regard the record as it has come down to us as a reliable transcription of what was actually said.

We are merely stating the problem, and not attempting to solve it. It is beset with difficulties that we have not the time, nor perhaps the competence, to resolve. But this we dare assert; that either supreme and flawless mastery of the art of conversation was manifested in Palestine during the reign of Tiberius Caesar—or never at all.

Meanwhile, whether or not it ever has, or will be attained, perfection is the goal towards which the genius of every true artist impels him to strive. The painters and sculptors, the musicians and poets among us, are as yet in a minority—some day, perhaps, every normal individual will be as certainly

capable of expressing himself through one or all of these mediums as he is, to-day, of writing his own name; but as yet the one art in which the average man is concerned to make himself proficient is that of life itself, and in the art of life that of conversation is included. To be human is not merely to live, but to live—and talk—well, and in that ‘well’, we include all that we can conceive of goodness, and truth, and beauty.

The great conversation that began in the shadow of the primeval forest has never ceased in all these hundreds of centuries, nor ever will, so long as human life endures. Discourse of speech is twin brother to discourse of reason; so if we neglect to take thought for its understanding or betterment, we are sacrificing our human birthright, and inviting a loss for which no gain of material progress can be reckoned as compensation.

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